

FLETCHER OF MADELEY

BY

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INTRODUCTION.

BY COMMISSIONER RAILTON.

There is a great difference between a red-hot man and a Red-hot Library book We have no desire at all to pander to the common idea of our day that “it does not matter what you belong to,” by any of these books Very little reflection will show anyone the immeasurable distance between the sort of clergyman this book describes and the mere leader of formalities holding a similar position in these days of ease and self-satisfaction.

John Fletcher was a marvel, if viewed only on his bodily side At a time when clergymen had far more opportunity than they have even to-day to retire into their own houses and do nothing for the world, he pressed forward, in spite of an almost dying body, to work for God daily, in the most devoted manner That he was able to continue his labours so long was simply by God’s wonder-working mercy. We cannot judge him because he remained in the strange position (for anyone who cares about God or souls) in which he was found No other sphere was perhaps possible for him at that time It must not, however, for that reason be imagined that the Salvationist can conceive of a red-hot life mixed with the reading of prayers out of a book, or the teaching of any poor soul to turn to such heathenish folly.

We can gladly take whatever is red-hot out of such a life without allowing ourselves to be poisoned in any respect whilst so doing But it seems necessary, at the very outset, to call attention to this, lest at any time it should be argued that, after all, the Salvationist life is no better, in our opinion, than the stiffest and most formal specimen of Christianity.

About this fervent soul, whose wife was one of the few preaching women of her century, there could have been little voluntary formality, and if he was able to exist amidst the framing that others had set up for him, it may be an encouragement to anyone who is shut out for a time from the free, happy worship that God desires, and left with no alternative but to be content with “Divine services” where God’s wishes are too often made of no effect by the arrangement of man.

But what will be the Salvationist’s condemnation if, with all the opportunities he has to cultivate the utmost freedom in prayer and service, he never attains to that intimacy with God, that delight in communion with Him, that power to force others into God’s presence, which John Fletcher’s life discloses to us?

The mere thought of Fletcher, if you read these pages carefully, will ever bring back to you an impression of nearness to God and companionship with Him which is scarcely conceived of in our day amongst the majority of those who ought to lead men to the Father. Do not let us excuse ourselves for any lack of that communion which must be His continual delight. If we pride ourselves upon our repudiation of forms of worship that men have invented, and glory in the manifestations of Christ at the street corner and in the public-house, to which we have become accustomed, let us take care that we do not grieve Him by contentment with the general action of The Army or of the Corps, or of the Brigade, in the absence of any close contact between our own souls and God or the lost.

This book will be useless unless it brings us continually right up to the personal questions which it is so eminently calculated to raise: Am I on such terms with God as this man was? Can He equally reckon upon my continual obedience and faithfulness? Is He sure to hear and answer me also? Do I share with Him that agony for souls, that inexhaustible pity and love which will never let one perish, for whom, by any extremity of sacrifice, I can do anything? Do I breathe out the breath of God upon those with whom I come in contact, making the world feel that I have no harmony with any of its aims or inclinations, but that I really belong to Heaven?

By inference, rather than directly, this life is a tremendous confirmation of the old faith John Fletcher gained all he had because he believed the Bible just as it stands. He knew from his own experience and from daily intercourse with Him that the promises it contains come direct from the mouth of God, and not from the "sublime imagination" of some Jew poet, as the contemptible deceivers of our day would have us believe. If there were any delusion about that old Book, then John Fletcher was one of the most pitiful specimens of a degraded superstition this world ever contained. But where, amongst all the applauded doubt-preachers of our day, is there to be found a man of love and prayer and power approaching to this one?

Do not let us be discouraged as to the possibility of a life as holy as this amidst the circumstances of our rushing warfare. John Fletcher was, after all, only a thorough disciple of Him who had not where to lay His head. None of us are called to live amidst denser crowds, more hurry, worry, or

contention of any sort than was the daily lot of our Heavenly Master This book would draw us farther from Him, not nearer, if it only made us thirst for retirement and stillness, for hours of meditation or privacy It is, not the imitation of Fletcher, but the imitation of Christ to which these pages are meant to call us Most of us may never possess many of the charming traits of this most refined gentleman. We may perhaps suit God's purposes amidst the rough crowd all the better for that But, depend upon it, close intercourse with the Nazarene is as possible amidst the throngs of London, or Glasgow, or New York, or Madras, as it was in the alleys of Jerusalem or Capernaum, and intimacy with Jesus is, after all, the one thing needful for every disciple.

But whoever is red-hot will ceaselessly be thinking and planning for the worst; that is to say, not only for those commonly called the worst, whose wild career of sin strikes all decent people with horror, but for the far more seriously in danger, who turn their very religion into a form or an amusement, and care nothing for any real intercourse with God. These are the people perhaps most difficult of all to get at, the people whom we shall never be likely to make any impression upon unless we combine with the greatest possible activity an intensity of spiritual heat and power of which we suppose Fletcher was one of the grandest specimens the world ever had. Do not let us resent or run away from any reproach as to our own comparative coldness and inefficiency which this story may bring to us How much better to writhe and be aroused under any such reproofs now than only to awake to them when life is slipping away! Alas! for the readers who shall close this book without resolving to be as holy and useful as God commands us all to be!

London, April, 1905.

The Life of John Fletcher.

CHAPTER I.

At the Castle

In the nursery of a fine old Swiss castle, on the shores of Lake Lemman, stood a small boy of seven, confronted by his white-capped nurse.

“You are a naughty boy!” she exclaimed “Do you not know that the devil is to take away all naughty children?”

The little fellow opened wide his clear, truthful eyes, into which there crept a deepening look of trouble—trouble rather than fear; big tears rolled down his pinafore, and when tucked away for the night, Jean Guillaume De La Fléchère crept out of his cosy cot, sank upon his knees, and began the first real prayer of his life: “O God, forgive me!” Nor would he be interrupted until the inward sense of pardon comforted his sorrowing little heart. Many years later he described this time as the shedding abroad of the love of God within him.

Colonel De La Fléchère’s family mansion commanded as fine a view of Swiss scenery as could be found in the neighbourhood “Hill and dale, vineyards and pastures, stretched right away to the distant Jura mountains. At a few paces from the château was a terrace overlooking Lake Lemman, with its clear blue waters and its gracefully curved and richly-wooded bays. On the right hand, at a distance of fifteen miles, was Geneva, the cradle of the Reformation in Switzerland; on the left, Lausanne and the celebrated Castle of Chillon. High up in the heavens were Alpine peaks, embosoming scenes the most beautiful; and not far away was Mont Blanc, ‘robed in perpetual and unsullied snow.’” (Tyerman.)

In this earthly paradise the little Jean received his first unconscious training, breathing not only the clear mountain air into his lungs, but a no less important atmosphere of refinement, of culture, and of nobility into his mental and moral being.

He was devoted to his mother, who could never say he wilfully disobeyed her. One day, however, she deemed him lacking in reverence for her,

because, when rebuking a member of the family over-sharply, John turned upon her a long look of evident reproof She promptly boxed his ears, but was more than mollified when the boy lifted his clear eyes to hers, brimful of tenderness, and said simply, "Mother, when I am smitten on one cheek, and especially by a hand I love so well, I am taught to turn the other also."

It was not priggishness, but submissive affection, and she read it aright.

CHAPTER II.

In the Manor House

In the château at Nyon Jean De La Fléchère was keeping his tenth birthday (September 12th, 1739) Away in old England the Lord of the Manor of Leytonstone, Essex, was giving his first caresses to a tiny baby girl, later to be known as little Mary Bosanquet, and forty years later still as the wife of the saintly John Fletcher, Vicar of Madeley.

Mary was but a four-year-old baby when she received her first definite conviction that God hears and answers prayer She was a timid little maiden, and the greatest comfort she had in the world was the fact that she possessed a real Father in Heaven, strong, mighty, and willing to protect and help her Sunday evenings in Forest House—as the Bosanquet mansion was called—were devoted to the children On those occasions Mary's father taught her sister and herself the Church catechism. At five years old his youngest daughter asked questions concerning true Christians according to the Word of God, which might well have encouraged evasion on the part of her parent She reasoned out everything told her; but her eager and earnest questions being so constantly put carelessly by, gave her childish mind the impression that the Bible did not mean all it said, therefore a sensible person would make due allowance for its threatenings.

As this thought began to take well hold of Mary, a Methodist girl entered the household as nurse, whose conversations with the children were a great enlightenment to them both.

In a year or two the nurse left them, but not before she had implanted in little Mary's mind the truth that it was not being united to any church or people which would save her, but that she must be converted through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and that the fruits of believing in Him as a personal Saviour would be power to love and serve God with a holy heart That was excellent, but it had not been so explained to the child that she could

understand the process either of “faith” or of “conversion.” The result was perplexity.

Not a few children in bygone days have had to suffer long Sunday afternoon agonies over the harrowing pictures of Foxe’s “Book of Martyrs,” this being then considered a profitable and bracing Sabbatic “exercise” for hundreds of sensitive little ones whose dreams were haunted, and whose waking hours in the dark were rendered terrific by vivid imaginings of racked, tortured, and burning saints Mary was one of these Yet so troubled was her little heart over the ungrasped subject of faith that one day, while gazing upon these fearful pictures, she exclaimed to herself, “Oh! oh! I do think it would be easier to *burn* than to *believe*!”

Mary seems to have been busy with these thoughts for nearly two years She had not passed her eighth birthday when we find her sitting by herself for “a good think,” and wondering “*What* can it mean to have faith in Jesus?”

Vexed with the mystery of the subject, her childish soul rose in rebellion against God for having chosen so hard a way into salvation, and she exclaimed aloud—

“Oh, if I had to die a martyr, I could do it; or give away all I have, I could do that; or when I grow up to have to be a servant, that would be easy; but I shall never, never, *never* know how to believe!”

Two lines of an old hymn drifted instantly through her mind—

Who on Jesus relies, without money or price,
The pearl of forgiveness and holiness buys.

It was the light she needed. The Spirit of Love had taken pity upon the little girl From that moment the plan of salvation was clear to her, and she cried out—

“I do, I do rely on Jesus; yes, I *do* rely on Jesus; and God counts me righteous for all He has done and suffered, and hath forgiven all my sins!”

She felt that a great weight had been lifted from her heart Before this it seemed that everything in the world was easier than to believe, now it appeared the simplest plan God could have devised. Had there been but a kindly and understanding person near to whom Mary could talk freely, she might have been a happy, trusting little Soldier of Jesus from that hour, but there was no one to help her into the sunshine of a child's daily faith and love and service, and religion became to her rather a subject for morbid thought Terribly afraid of sin, not understanding temptation, wholly uninstructed how to get victory over her temper and other failings, she grew discouraged, and feared she had sadly grieved God With all this shut up in her soul, perhaps it was no wonder that her mother should sometimes exclaim: "That girl is the most perverse creature that ever lived; I cannot think what has come to her."

CHAPTER III.

Early Adventures

From the bathing-place of Nyon château a slim, tall lad shot out into the blue water, as much at home there, evidently, as he had been while racing on the terrace His long hair was bound by a strong ribbon, which the active movements of the swimmer at length loosened In some unexplainable manner the ribbon caught and wound itself about the boy's feet, tying his head to his heels, and rendering a full stroke impossible With all his might he struggled and tore, but the bond only grew tighter He was in deep water, no help within call, and the awful thought came that there, in the budding of his bright young life, he must be cut off and die a helpless prisoner He stayed his struggles, almost paralysed at the thought, and that instant the ribbon gave way and he recovered himself.

Nor was that his only narrow escape from death in the same lake Five miles from the shore a rocky island reared its head.

"It would be a fine feat to swim there from land," said young Fletcher to four of his companions They agreed, and the five set forth Fletcher and one other lad succeeded in reaching the island, but found its smooth cliffs sank so steeply into the water that there was no possibility of climbing them Despairingly they swam around the islet again and again, finding at last a bare foothold to which they clung until a boat fetched them off The other three could swim but half the distance to the island, and would have sunk exhausted had not a passing boat picked them up.

A third time young Fletcher narrowly escaped drowning; on this occasion it was in the Rhine, where the river is wide and very rapid. The current swept him far from home, nor could he land for the sharp rocks on either hand At length he was flung violently against one of the piles of a powder mill, lost consciousness, and disappeared, rising again on the other side of the mill (according to an onlooker, who took out his watch) *twenty minutes after* his

head had vanished beneath the water Surely a guardian angel accompanied Jean De La Fléchère in all his earthly wanderings!

Although a good rider and practised swimmer, the life of this young fellow was not by any means wasted in athletics and sport; he studied hard to prepare himself for the University of Geneva, succeeding most brilliantly His extraordinary diligence, no less than his striking ability, distinguished him among the other students, and he bore off first prizes with ease, studying early and late that he might acquire the knowledge he loved After leaving the University he gave himself to the acquirement of the German language, and studied Hebrew and higher mathematics.

All this he did with the idea of becoming a minister of the Gospel, but the more he thought about the burden which he would assume by so doing, the less he felt able for his suggested task.

“Go into the army, Fletcher,” pleaded some of his friends, and it was not long before he turned the power of his clear brain to work upon military engineering He became very keen on his chosen profession, and at the time when Portugal was despatching troops to Brazil, Fletcher hied himself to Lisbon, gathered together a company of young Englishmen, accepted a Captain’s commission, and agreed to sail upon a certain day in the Portuguese Service.

His father, Colonel De La Fléchère, refused to sanction the step, or to supply him with the money he requested for the enterprise.

“I will go without it,” he resolved, and counted the hours to the sailing of the man-o’-war.

A day or two before the appointed date a maid, who was serving him with breakfast, clumsily dropped the tea-kettle upon his leg, scalding him so severely that he had to take to his bed While there the ship sailed, and in view of Fletcher’s later life, it is a striking fact that she was never heard of again.

Though desperately disappointed, Fletcher was as keen as ever on becoming a soldier He returned to Nyon, and, to his unbounded delight,

learned that his uncle had procured him a commission in the Dutch Service, of which he was a Colonel.

Eagerly he made his way to Flanders, grudging the days of travel which kept him out of his ambition Bent though he was in rough-hewing his way according to his desire, Providence was surely shaping for him an end other than he planned. On his arrival Fletcher found that peace was concluded; his soldiering capabilities were no longer required. Almost immediately his uncle died, and the door into the military profession seemed closed to him for ever.

CHAPTER IV.

A Sweet Girlhood

Mary Bosanquet grew into sweet and graceful girlhood “It is time she saw the world,” decided her mother, and forthwith preparations were made for her to accompany the family, who were to spend three gay months in Bath. She dressed and danced as did the rest, but in the very ball-room found herself thinking, “If I only knew where to find the Methodists, or any who would show me how to please God, I would tear off all my fine things and run through the fire to them. If ever I am my own mistress I will spend half the day in working for the poor, and the other half in prayer.”

Not long after this Mary’s sister visited a friend who declared herself recently converted, and in her house Mary found her longed-for help and counsel—“the greatest comfort of my life,” as she expressed it.

Association with this Mrs. Lefevre, who died when Mary was seventeen, led the girl to declare to her father that she desired to lead a better life than one of mere amusement, begging him to allow her to be left at home when the family visited the theatre and other scenes of gaiety. The opposition she met with was trying, but it served to strengthen her for the career which was to open to her in later life.

It was natural that Mary’s friends should wish her to marry, but at the time when this was first put before her she heard Mrs. Crosby (one of Wesley’s helpers) speak upon the necessity of holiness and the joy of a life fully devoted to God. With the gentleman who was striving to win her affections life would never have been the sacred thing Mary desired for herself, she therefore gave up all thought of marriage, began to dress plainly, and waited for God to show her *His* way.

CHAPTER V.

A New Life

Checked in his military ardour, John Fletcher turned his thoughts again to study. His linguistic powers were great; it was to him a cheerful distraction to join a party of students who were proceeding to England to become familiar with the language.

At the first English inn at which they stayed Fletcher showed that simple confidence in his brother-man which so distinguished his later life by trusting a strange Jew with all his money for the purpose of changing it into English coin. His fellow-students exclaimed, "You will never see another crown of it!" but whether or not that quality in Fletcher which always expected the very best from a man worked salvation in this case as in many another, certain it is that the Jew returned with the £90 intact.

For eighteen months Fletcher studied English at a school in Hertfordshire, and afterwards became tutor to the two sons of a Member of Parliament named Hill.

He little knew then how important a link in the providential chain was that appointment. Up to this time, although he had deeply appreciated religion, had read his Bible and prayed much, using any leisure he could gain between his ordinary studies for the research of prophecy and the perusal of devotional books, yet he lacked any experience of living union with God; joy in Christ was an unknown bliss; the "peace which passeth all understanding" was unrevealed to him. To his brother Henry he thus described his condition:—

"My feelings were easily excited, but my heart was rarely affected, and I was destitute of a sincere love to God, and consequently to my neighbour. All my hopes of salvation rested on my prayers, devotions, and a certain habit of saying, 'Lord, I am a great sinner; pardon me for the sake of Jesus Christ!' In the meantime I was ignorant of the fall and ruin in which every

man is involved, the necessity of a Redeemer, and the way by which we may be rescued from the fall by receiving Christ with a living faith. I should have been quite confounded if anyone had asked me the following questions: 'Do you know that you are dead in Adam? Do you live to yourself? Do you live in Christ and for Christ? Does God rule in your heart? Do you experience that peace of God which passeth all understanding? Is the love of God shed abroad in your heart by the Holy Spirit?'"

A vivid dream concerning the Day of Judgment was used to arouse him, and for some days he was so depressed and harassed in mind that he could not settle to any occupation for long together. Sunday arrived; no teaching demanded his mental application; he wandered listlessly from place to place, miserable and dejected. At length he sat down to copy some music. The door opened and in walked the butler, an old servant of the family, and a countryman of Fletcher's. For a moment he paused, then approaching the tutor, said firmly, but respectfully:—

"Sir, I am surprised that you, who know so many things, should forget what day this is, and that you should not be aware that the Lord's Day should be sanctified in a very different manner."

The man was a true Christian, deeply humble, and full of zealous love for God. The knowledge of many things he had borne patiently for Christ, coupled with the strange power with which he spoke, smote the tutor with a sense of his own shortcomings, and made him exclaim to his own heart, "I am not renewed in the spirit of my mind, and without this the death of Christ will not avail for my salvation!"

Not long after this Mr. Hill went up to London to attend Parliament, accompanied by his tutor and family. On the road they stayed for a meal and to change horses at St. Albans, and Fletcher went for a brisk walk through the streets to stretch his limbs.

The horses were put to, but the tutor did not appear. After some delay the post-chaise drove off, a horse being left in readiness for the tutor to mount and ride after them. When in the evening he overtook the party, Mr. Hill enquired why he stayed behind. He replied, "As I was walking I met with a

poor old woman, who talked so sweetly of Jesus Christ that I knew not how the time passed away.”

“I shall wonder,” said Mrs. Hill, “if our tutor does not turn Methodist by-and-by.”

“Methodist, Madame!” asked he, puzzled; “pray what is that?”

“Why, the Methodists are a people that do nothing but pray,” was her rejoinder; “they are praying all day and all night.”

“Are they? Then by the help of God I *will* find them out,” said he decidedly.

He not only “found them out,” but joined a Methodist society, meeting with them whenever an opportunity presented itself.

Fletcher could not readily rid himself of the idea that “much doing” would make him acceptable unto God Gradually, however, he was brought to consider the value of “saving faith,” and writes in his diary:—

“Instead of going straight to Christ I have lost my time in fighting against sin with the dim light of reason, and the use of the means of grace I fear my notions of Christ are only speculative, and do not reach the heart. *I never had faith*, and without faith it is impossible to please God Then every thought, word, and work of mine have only been sin and wickedness before God, though ever so specious before men All my righteousness is as filthy rags I am a very devil, though of an inferior sort, and if I am not renewed before I go hence, hell will be my portion to all eternity....

“I begged of God to show me all the wickedness of my heart, and to fit me for His mercy I besought Him to increase my convictions, for I was afraid I did not *mourn* enough for my sins But I found relief in Mr. Wesley’s Journal, where I learned that we should not build on what we feel, but that we should go to Christ with all our sins and all our hardness of heart.

“On January 21st I began to write a confession of my sins, misery, and helplessness, together with a resolution to seek Christ even unto death, but, my business calling me away, I had no heart to go on with it In the evening

I read the Scriptures, and found a sort of pleasure in seeing a picture of my wickedness so exactly drawn in the third chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, and that of my condition in the seventh; and now I felt some hope that God would finish in me the work He had begun.”

It would have been strange if at this important crisis the devil had let him alone. In many ways the enemy fought for his soul Among other hindrances he was beset with temptations to evil thoughts, and, distressed beyond measure, he cried to God with a *definite* faith which grew out of the very desperateness of his immediate need of help Hope grew within his cheerless soul, for, as he says:—

“Having withstood two or three temptations, and feeling peace in my soul through the whole of them, I began to think it was the Lord’s doing Afterwards it was suggested to me that it was great presumption for such a sinner to hope for such a mercy I prayed I might not be permitted to fall into a delusion; but the more I prayed the more I saw it was real, for though sin stirred all the day long, I always overcame it in the name of the Lord.

“In the evening I read some of the experiences of God’s children, and found my case agreed with theirs, and suited the sermon I had heard on Justifying Faith I called on the Lord for perseverance and an increase of faith, for still I felt some fear lest this should be all delusion. Having continued my supplication till near one in the morning, I then opened my Bible and fell on these words, ‘Cast thy burden on the Lord, and He shall sustain thee He will never suffer the righteous to be moved.’ Filled with joy, I fell on my knees to beg of God that I might always cast my burden upon Him I took up my Bible again, and fell on these words, ‘I will be with thee; I will not fail thee, neither forsake thee; fear not, neither be dismayed.’ My hope was now greatly increased, and I thought I saw myself conqueror over sin, hell, and all manner of affliction.

“With this beautiful promise I shut my Bible, and as I shut it I cast my eye on the words, ‘Whatsoever ye shall ask in My name I will do it.’ So, having asked perseverance and grace to serve God till death, I went cheerfully to take my rest.”

CHAPTER VI.

Given Up to the Fight

Not content, as many are, with consciousness of sins forgiven, Fletcher at once began to plead that God would take fullest possession of his heart, and grant to him a deeper experience of His love. While lying upon his face in earnest prayer the Saviour strangely manifested Himself to his eye of faith, and it was revealed to him that Jesus had wondrously become his soul's inmost life, abiding in him to conquer sin.

This completely changed his spiritual position. The blessed realisation that in Christ he could triumph over sin and keep the world beneath his feet, filled him with a glad sense of freedom. He resolved that nothing should prevent him from experiencing this to the full: he gave all his leisure to prayer and meditation, living on vegetables, bread, milk and water, that he might be able to save time from the long courses of dinner, many a day lunching in the garden from a piece of bread and a few bunches of currants; also making it a rule to do without sleep two nights of each week in order to pray.

This extremely rigid rule of life was a mistake. Lack of proper rest and food at this period undoubtedly laid the foundation of his subsequent delicacy. Most men attend to the cravings of the body to the expense of the lightly-fed soul; all his life Fletcher gave less heed to physical needs than his not-too-robust frame required, and he paid the penalty.

As a natural gift, Fletcher possessed a very sweet and gentle spirit. Companionship with Christ grafted upon this an unusual humility, as simple as it was sincere. An instance of this is found in the fact that when the clergyman of Atcham Church (which Fletcher attended while at Tern Hall) invited adults who required instruction to join the children's catechumen class, gifted scholar though he was, he stepped out and took his place by the little ones as a matter of course, unmoved by the fact that he was the only adult who did not despise the proffered instruction.

Prayer, with Fletcher, was not a duty but a refreshment and an inspiration. Every Sunday morning, between four and five, and two or three nights in the week, after his pupils were asleep, he used to go out into the meadows, or on to the banks of the Severn, to meet an Excise Officer, a servant, and a poor widow. These four would pour out their whole souls to God in prayer, and wonderful were the manifestations of Divine love and grace vouchsafed to them.

The poor of Atcham village and its neighbourhood grew well accustomed to the fine, pure face of the Tern Hall tutor; sickness always drew him, and were there none at hand to nurse them as they needed he was quick to give help.

Thus continually brought face to face with the needs of ignorant and uncared-for men, it was no wonder that Fletcher should return to the thought (suggested to him many times previously) of devoting himself altogether to ministering the gospel of the grace of God. Before taking any step towards such a life, however, he asked the advice of John Wesley, whom he already looked upon as his spiritual guide. Apparently the answer he received was encouraging, for less than four months after he put the question, John Fletcher was ordained as a clergyman of the Church of England.

Straight from his ordination service in the Chapel Royal at St. James's, Fletcher hurried to Snowfields Methodist Chapel to assist Wesley in a service there—a sufficiently unusual commencement of a clergyman's career!

CHAPTER VII.

Turned from Home

Mary Bosanquet's determination to lay aside the ordinary pleasures of girlhood, and live a life of waiting upon God for the revelation of His will, came just two months after John Fletcher's ordination. Little enough happened to her for a couple of years, save that she succeeded in increasingly impressing those around her that it was useless to invite her into paths of worldliness and frivolity. When a girl of nineteen she stayed for seven weeks in Bristol, renewing there her friendship with Miss Sarah Ryan—to whom Fletcher wrote some of his famous letters—through whom, and through Mrs. Crosby, Mary was introduced to her future husband.

When she came of age Mary Bosanquet found herself mistress of her personal fortune, and more strongly than ever was she assured that she might do better work for God if she left her own home. Always afraid of moving before the Guiding Pillar, however, she feared exceedingly to take this step unless the express command were laid upon her.

One day her father asked for her solemn promise that she would not try to persuade her brothers to follow Christ.

"I am afraid I cannot promise that, father," she replied.

"Then you will force me to put you out of the house," was his rejoinder.

In preparation for whatever might follow, Mary took a lodging, and waited until she should be told to go, which quickly happened.

It was a pathetic departure. Before dinner a message reached her by a servant that she had better go to her lodging that night. During the meal no word was said, and Mary's heart was wrung by sorrowful questionings—"How shall I go, if they say no more to me? How shall I bear it, if they never invite me to see them again?"

Dinner being at last concluded, and the carriage announced, Mrs. Bosanquet swept out into the hall, remarking casually to Mary as she passed by :—

“If you will, the coach, when it has set us down, may carry you home to your lodgings.”

“And we shall be glad to see you to dinner on Sunday,” added her father.

Mary choked and could not reply, but she quickly recovered sufficiently to order her trunk downstairs, and, when cloaked and hooded, she passed down the staircase, she found all the servants assembled in a row to bid her farewell with tears.

The two rooms she had taken were fireless, dark, and unfurnished. A table and candlestick were quickly borrowed, and Mary sat down upon a broad window-seat to ponder what was to her a strange situation.

By the time her maid arrived, and invited her to a fire, and a sumptuous supper of bread, rank salt butter, and water, God had so comforted her and assured her of His favour and presence that she was filled with thankfulness and peace; the empty room and sparse, candle-lit meal seemed to her part of “a little heaven.”

No beds could be put up at so late an hour; blinds and curtains were not in evidence. Mary Bosanquet lay that night upon the bare floor, and the pure, clear moonlight shone coldly upon her as she lay, but the fire of Divine love burned warm within her heart; she communed with her God in utter content.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Tern Hall Tutor

For three years after his ordination Fletcher received no church appointment. He remained as tutor at Tern Hall, and preached wherever he could find an opening, either in French or in English.

Amongst ordinary church-goers his decided utterances made him far from popular, but the warm hearts of the Methodist people bade him hearty welcome, and these he learned to love truly and well. They introduced him to “many honourable women,” several of whom became his friends and correspondents; none of them, however, impressed him as did Mary Bosanquet.

In writing to her brother nearly twenty-five years later he said of this meeting: “It was soon after my ordination that I saw Miss Mary Bosanquet. I had resolved not to marry, but the sweetness of her temper and her devotedness to God made me think that if ever I broke through my resolution it would be to cast my lot with one like her.”

One may judge of the quiet but strong influence Fletcher exerted in his neighbourhood by an incident which happened during that autumn. To Tern Hall one night came a messenger from Salop, asking urgently for “the tutor.” The letter he delivered bore no name, but it begged Mr. Fletcher to hasten at once to a certain inn, where he might find a soul who wanted God. Without a question the tutor set out on his five-mile walk, not knowing whether beggar or duke demanded his help. He found the eldest son of a baronet, whom God’s Spirit had rendered so strangely wretched on account of sin that he could neither eat nor sleep. Doctors had done their best to remove this remarkable malady, but the one remedy lay in the touch of the hand of the Great Physician, and, almost in despair, his soul cried, “Oh, that I knew where I might find Him!”

The visit of that October night resulted in correspondence which was blessed to Sir Richard Hill's conversion, although the young man became in later years one of Fletcher's most active opponents in a doctrinal controversy.

This time of waiting for God to show his future sphere of work was much blessed to Fletcher in spiritually preparing him for it Through an incident in which he was much misunderstood by many, he learned the all-important lesson to a preacher, that a sermon full of the most vigorous ideas is as nothing if not inspired by the living Spirit.

His own account of the matter is brief but instructive:—

“Just as I was going to resume my daily course of business I was called to preach in a church at Salop, and was obliged to compose a sermon in the moments I should have spent in prayer. Hurry and the want of a single eye drew a veil between the prize and my soul In the meantime Sunday came, and God rejected my impure service and abhorred the labour of my polluted soul; and while others imputed my not preaching to the fear of the minister who had invited me to his pulpit, and to the threatenings of a mob, I saw the wisdom and holiness of God, and rejoiced in that providence which does all without the assistance of hurrying Uzzah.”

During the holidays Fletcher would betake himself to London, giving all his time to service in connection with a chapel in Seven Dials The sermon he did not preach bore fruit in his own heart, and to his beloved friend, Charles Wesley, he wrote: “May God water the poor seed I have sown, and give it fruitfulness, *though it be only in one soul!* But I have seen so much weakness in my heart, both as a minister and a Christian, that I know not which is most to be pitied— the man, the believer, or the preacher Could I at last be *truly* humbled and *continue so always*, I should esteem myself happy in making this discovery. I preach *merely* to keep the chapel open until God shall send a workman *after His own heart.*”

During the famous earthquake of nine years before a little Welsh girl named Mary Price was then attending a London school The children were frightened nearly out of their wits by the upheaval, the crash of broken glass, the long subterranean rumbling, and, in common with many London

residents, in that hour little Mary promised to serve God For nine years she strove and prayed, but found no way by which she could come near to Him Persuaded by a friend who knew her inward sorrow, she sought out the despised Methodist meeting-house in Seven Dials, and there heard Fletcher preaching for his “one soul.” Light flashed through all her being as she listened, and that morning Mary Price saw the “Way” to unerring “Truth” and everlasting “Life,” entering later on into lifelong communion with Him whom her spirit had so earnestly sought.

For fifty-nine years Mary was a shining light in the kingdom of grace.

CHAPTER IX.

The Vicar of Madeley

At thirty years of age Fletcher was pressed to become a missionary to Antigua, but was prevented by the advice of Charles Wesley, who foresaw for him a more useful service in England.

Introduced by John Wesley to the famous Countess of Huntingdon, Fletcher was further commended to her by the poet-brother in such a manner as led her to urge him to become chaplain to her household. On the understanding that the appointment should not interfere either with his preaching, or the work he had taken up amongst French prisoners and refugees, he accepted the post, and through it became acquainted with many great spirits who ranked amongst the noble of the earth.

A great work was at this time being done at Everton, the parish of the Rev John Berridge, and Fletcher made special efforts to see and profit by it. He introduced himself to the noted clergyman as a convert seeking instruction and advice. Berridge, noting his foreign accent, asked him his nationality.

“A Swiss from the Canton of Berne,” was the reply.

“From Berne! Ah, then you can give me some account of a young countryman of yours, one John Fletcher, who has lately preached a few times for the Mr. Wesleys, and of whose talents, learning, and piety they both speak in terms of high eulogy. Do you know him?”

“I know him intimately, and did those gentlemen know him as well they would not speak of him in such terms, for which he is more obliged to their partial friendship than to his own merits,” was the unexpected reply.

“You surprise me,” objected Berridge, “in speaking so coldly of a countryman in whose praises they are so warm.”

“I have the best of reasons for speaking of him as I do—I am John Fletcher.”

Berridge melted at this, and insisted upon his occupying his pulpit the following morning. For three days Fletcher remained at Everton, joined there by the Countess of Huntingdon and two well-known clergymen, Martin Madan and Henry Venn. The services were, perforce, held in the open-air, for on the third day ten thousand persons gathered to hear the word of God. Many fell to the ground overpowered by the influence of the Spirit, and numbers cried for mercy.

Fletcher's life as a tutor now ended. Mr. Hill was extremely anxious to benefit him, and to this end offered him the living of Dunham, in Cheshire, explaining that the duty was light, the income £400 a year (a good sum in those days), and the surrounding country delightful.

“Dunham will not suit me,” said Fletcher quietly; “there is too much money and too little labour.”

“What shall we do? Would you like Madeley? My nephew is the patron, and I am sure the present Vicar would be only too glad to exchange it for anything so good as Dunham.”

“It would suit me exactly,” quoth Fletcher, kindling at the thought He had preached there, and knew the rough character of its colliers and forgers.

Curiously enough, the old Vicar of Dunham died suddenly. The day after the event Mr. Hill met his nephew at the Shrewsbury races, and in that unlikeliest place of all, it was arranged that the Madeley living should be presented to Fletcher.

It was a matter of course that he should consult his friend Charles Wesley, but though he longed, if God so led, to undertake the work, he feared greatly that many who were violently opposed to some of his views would resist the appointment, and that the greatest barrier of all, the Bishop of Lichfield, would refuse to countersign his testimonials.

An extract from one of his letters to the Countess of Huntingdon shows how all these obstacles were removed:—

“The difficulty of getting proper testimonials, which I had looked upon as insurmountable, vanishes at once; the three clergymen that had opposed me with the most bitterness signed them; the Bishop of Lichfield countersigns them without the least objection; the lord of the manor, my great opposer, leaves the parish; and the Vicar, who told me that I should never preach in that church, now recommends me to it, and tells me he will induct me himself Are not these the intimations of the will of God? It seems so to me.”

So it came to pass that in the parish book was made the following entry:—

“John Fletcher, clerk, was inducted to the vicarage of Madeley the 17th of October, 1760.—John Fletcher, Vicar.”

CHAPTER X.

An Alarmed Parish

In the same month as Mary Bosanquet was cast out of her father's home to commence life anew as a toiler for God, John Fletcher settled down to his work in the parish of his choice.

Madeley lies three or four miles from the foot of the Wrekin in a winding glen, through which flows the River Severn. So far it was a place of beauty, but in no other sense. The colliers and iron-workers of Coalbrookdale and Madeley were ignorant, brutal, and much given to drunkenness and profanity. The Sabbath was ignored, decency frequently flouted, bull-baiting a favourite pastime, and religion a matter of coarse ridicule and bitter scorn. After their day's work the inhabitants frequently held nights of revelry, lasting until dawn, when dancing, drunkenness, and obscenity reigned supreme.

Fletcher commenced his campaign with great earnestness and zeal. He had no idea of contenting himself with preaching to a handful of feeble folk twice upon a Sunday; he counted every day lost if he had not in it brought some of his people face to face with the requirements of God. In cottages, at street corners, or in the church, he held a service just as often as he could gather sufficient people together; he visited the public-houses, and even appeared at the midnight carousals, warning men of the wrath of God, and urging them to flee to Jesus for mercy.

The parishioners of Madeley grew decidedly uncomfortable. They desired nothing so much as to be left alone, and the influence of this new parson was a force with which they found it necessary to reckon. They grew to dread the sudden opening of their tavern and dance-room doors, and the appearance of the pale, pure-faced man, whose eyes glowed like coals, and whose words burned and stung as he rebuked sin.

They were not used to being continually confronted with the claims of God; they did not relish the urgency with which Fletcher insisted upon *conversion* rather than church-going. They turned upon him in public; they maligned him in private; they disturbed his informal meetings; they cursed his name. One thing they were bound to do, however, they respected his courage and goodness, and that alone was sufficient eventually to turn the tide.

It was a lonely time for Fletcher. He was a young man, with no companion; he was of cultured mind, and greatly missed some kindred intelligence and friendly spirit with which he might commune of the things which pressed upon his soul. Little wonder that his heart should turn towards the sweet-spirited woman whose face dwelt in his memory with gentle persistence. He looked upon the idea of marriage, however, as a snare to draw his thoughts from his work, and he fought it down as something unworthy of his high calling.

“I am driven to the Lord,” he wrote to the Countess of Huntingdon, “and He comforts, encourages, and teaches me. The devil, my friends, and my heart have pushed at me to make me fall into worldly cares and creature snares . . . but I have been enabled to cry, ‘Nothing but Jesus and the service of His people,’ and I trust the Lord will keep me in the same mind.”

Fletcher lived with the utmost frugality, for some time doing without even a servant, and taking his meals at a neighbour’s house. An idea of his simplicity of life may be gained from a story told by one who was at a boarding-school at Madeley which Mr. Fletcher frequently visited:—

“One morning he came in just as the girls had sat down to breakfast. He said but little while the meal lasted, but when it was finished he spoke to each girl separately, and concluded by saying to the whole, ‘I have waited some time on you this morning, that I might see you eat your breakfast; and I hope you will visit me to-morrow morning to see how I eat mine.’ He told them his breakfast-hour was seven o’clock, and obtained a promise that they would visit him. Next morning they went at the time appointed, and seated themselves in the kitchen. Mr. Fletcher came in quite rejoiced to see them. On the table stood a small basin of milk and sops of bread. Mr. Fletcher carried the basin across the kitchen and sat down on an old bench

He then took out his watch, laid it before him, and said, 'My dear girls, yesterday morning I waited on you a full hour while you were at breakfast; I shall take as much time this morning in eating my breakfast as I usually do, if not rather more. Look at my watch!' He immediately began to eat, and continued in conversation with them. When he had finished he asked how long he had been at breakfast They said, 'Just a minute and a-half, sir.' 'Now, my dear girls,' said he, we have fifty-eight minutes of the hour left,' and he then began to sing—

“Our life is a dream!
Our time as a stream
Glides swiftly away,
And the fugitive moment refuses to stay.

“After this he gave them a lecture on the worth of time and the worth of the soul. They then all knelt down in prayer.”

CHAPTER XI.

The Vicar's Sermons.

The Vicar of Madeley led no idle life. He started Friday evening lectures; on Sunday afternoon he catechised the school-children, spent many hours of every day in visiting the sick and poor, and hesitated not at all to sit up whole nights with any who lacked attention. To the careless landowners and farmers whom he failed to get into his church he addressed the first of his published sermons, with a preface which urged them to *read* his message if they would not listen to it.

With Fletcher there was no preaching against the absent wrong-doer, no haranguing evil in the abstract, but there was never lacking a definite and personal denouncement of present and personal sin. One tremendous word loomed large before his hearers, nor could any misunderstand when he talked about *sin*, and the arousing thought was pressed ever closer to them by his pointed use of the word *you*. Here is an example:—

“Did you ever make a prey of the poor and helpless? Are you like the horse-leech, ever crying, ‘Give, give!’ still wanting more profit, and never thinking you have enough? Do you take more care to heap up treasure on earth than in Heaven? Have you got the unhappy secret of distilling silver out of the poor man’s brow, and gold out of the tears of helpless widows and friendless orphans? Or, which is rather worse, do you, directly or indirectly, live by poisoning others, by encouraging the immoderate use of those refreshments which, if taken to excess, disorder the reason, ruin the soul, and prove no better than slow poison to the body? If your business calls you to buy or sell, do you use falsehoods? do you equivocate? do you exaggerate or conceal the truth in order to impose upon your neighbour, and make a profit of his necessity or credulity? If any of these marks be upon you, God’s word singles you out and drags you to the bar of Divine justice to hear your doom in the text, ‘*The wicked shall surely die.*’ Oh, see your danger; repent and make restitution! Why should you meet the unjust steward in Hell, when you may yet follow Zacchaeus into Heaven?...

“Perhaps your conscience bears you witness that you are not a swearing Christian, or rather a swearing infidel Well, but are you clear in the point of adultery, fornication, or uncleanness? Does not the guilt of some vile sin, which you have wickedly indulged in time past, and perhaps are still indulging, mark you for the member of a harlot, and not the member of Christ? Do you not kindle the wrath of Heaven against yourself and your country, as the men and women of Gomorrah did against themselves and the other cities of the plain? If you cherish the sparks of wantonness, as they did, how can you but be made with them to suffer the vengeance of eternal fire? Do not flatter yourselves with the vain hope that your sin is not so heinous as theirs. If it be less in degree, is it not infinitely greater in its aggravating circumstances? Were these poor Canaanites *Christians*? Had they Bibles and ministers? Had they sermons and sacraments? Did they ever vow, as you have done, to renounce the devil and all sinful lusts of the flesh? Did they ever hear of the Son of God sweating great drops of blood, in an agony of prayer, to quench the fire of human corruption? Oh, acknowledge your guilt and danger, and by deep repentance prevent infallible destruction!”

Faithful and fearless utterances such as these made him famous, but not popular: inconsistent professors resented them deeply; open sinners raged at the unsparing denunciations which they could not fail to appropriate, yet out of the latter class came some of Fletcher’s best and most encouraging converts.

Much of his success in getting men to listen to unpalatable truths lay in his gentleness of manner and rare humility of mind, but “gentlest of human beings” as he has been described, he had the courage of a lion in fight, and for his Master’s sake he knew no palliation of unrighteousness, even though his truth-telling made the bitterest of enemies.

By nature Fletcher was not a meek man; he had “a fiery passionate spirit,” says one of his biographers, “insomuch that he has frequently thrown himself on the floor, and lain there most of the night bathed in tears, imploring victory over his own temper And he did obtain the victory, in a very eminent degree For twenty years and upwards before his death no one ever saw him out of temper, or heard him utter a rash expression on any

provocation whatever... I never saw him in any temper in which I myself would not have wished to be found at death.”

A friend who lived for some time in his house writes thus:—

“His enemies wrested his words, misrepresented his actions, and cast out his name as evil; but whether he was insulted in his person or injured in his property; whether he was attacked with open abuse or pursued with secret calumny, he walked amid the most violent assaults of his enemies, as a man invulnerable, and while his firmness discovered that he was unhurt, his forbearance testified that he was unoffended.”

To a man with talents trained as were his, with a power of expression which could melt into uncommon eloquence when he chose, with learning to illuminate, judgment to balance his effects, and extreme quickness of perception to adapt illustration and appeal to any audience, Fletcher might have made for himself a mighty name. Instead of this, “his design was to *convert* and not to *captivate* his hearers; to secure their eternal interests, and not to obtain their momentary applause... He spake as in the presence of God, and taught as one having Divine authority. There was an energy in his preaching that was irresistible. His subjects, his language, his gestures, the tone of his voice, and the turn of his countenance, all conspired to fix the attention and affect the heart. Without aiming at sublimity, he was truly sublime, and uncommonly eloquent without affecting the orator.”

CHAPTER XII.

Scanty Encouragements.

Fletcher's encouragements at Madeley were at first sufficiently scanty to have disheartened many an earnest man.

Two Marys were amongst his earliest converts Mary Matthews, of Madeley Wood, went to hear him with the mind of the Pharisee, but she left his presence with the heart of the publican. Having obtained the pardon of her sins, she opened her little house for preaching, and stood firm, although threatened by some of the villagers with a drum-led mob, and eventually haled before the magistrates and fined £20 for the offence of turning her cottage into a conventicle.

Mary Barnard, a lame old women of ninety, counted no pain or distance too great to prevent her from making her toilsome journey to the church where she "first saw the light," and, uneducated as she was, her definite testimony to the power of the cleansing Blood often cheered the preacher who had blessed her.

Fletcher's methods were unique for the times in which he lived There was no hiding from him Those who tried to escape his influence by avoiding his preachings were pursued into their various haunts and homes under all kinds of circumstances and at all hours Some pretended that they could not awake in time to get ready for his early services; he responded by going out himself with a bell and sounding such clashing peals in various parts of the parish that there remained no shadow of excuse for their sleeping after 5 a.m.!

He adopted the practice of dealing with criticisms and objections from the pulpit, a course sufficiently unusual to attract much attention to what he had to say.

Work as he might, however, Fletcher received so little encouragement that he was frequently burdened with the fear lest he had mistaken the Divine appointment.

One day, when he was much oppressed in this way, he was summoned to bury a parishioner. At once he lost sight of his own trouble in the opportunity of dealing out red-hot truths to a crowd of people. One man was so convicted that he broke out into a storm of bad language, fighting as best he knew how the strange influences of the Spirit. These were too strong for him, however, and he melted into tears of penitence. How gladly the Vicar gave him the pardon he asked for his behaviour, and led him further still into the joy of sins forgiven, can never be told. From that time he became an active helper in the parish, and one of Fletcher's greatest encouragements.

The conversion of this man, however, seemed only the signal for greater opposition on the part of some of the colliers. A number of them were baiting a bull near Madeley Wood Meeting-house one night when he was expected there to preach. "We'll wait here and *bait the parson!*" they cried, settling at once who should pull him off his horse, and who should set the dogs upon him.

Mr. Fletcher, all unsuspectingly, prepared for his walk to the wood, but on the threshold was met by a messenger who had forgotten to give notice of the burial of a child who was even then being carried up for its funeral. Here was a duty which could not be put off; the Vicar stayed to attend to it, and so missed his preaching appointment.

The men waited in vain, then repaired to a public-house to drink and curse their ill-luck. As they swore horrible oaths a huge china punch-bowl standing in the room fell in small fragments. This so impressed one of the number that he rose and left the place, vowing there and then to break with his old companions, and seek the salvation of his soul.

A somewhat well-known story is connected with Fletcher's sensitiveness to the influence of the Spirit with regard to his message for men. He had entered the pulpit one Sunday morning at Madeley to preach a sermon prepared for the purpose, when all remembrance of it fled; he could not even recall the text. Instantly throwing himself upon the Spirit of God for

guidance, he turned to the First Lesson for the day, which happened to be the history of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego As soon as he began to make some remarks upon it thoughts flowed, words burned, and he found himself so strangely upheld and inspired that he felt certain God intended the word for someone of whom he was not himself aware. So sure did he become of this fact that he requested to be privately informed if this were the case.

Three days later a woman called at the vicarage and told him that she had for some time been greatly concerned about her soul through attending his services Her husband noticed her habits of private prayer, and in a violent rage threatened her with frightful consequences if she did not refrain from her church-going She told him her conscience would not allow that, and with terrible oaths he cried, “I’ll cut your throat as soon as you come back, if you go!”

The poor woman only prayed the harder, and when Sunday morning came she dressed herself for church as usual As she passed through the kitchen her husband bellowed out, “I shall not cut your throat as I said, I shall heat the big oven and throw you into it the minute you get back.” To the accompaniment of savage swearing she closed the door and made her way to the church, praying all the time that God would strengthen her to suffer whatever might befall her.

In grateful amaze she drank in every word of Fletcher’s impromptu talk upon the three martyrs in the fiery furnace, and to herself she cried softly, “If I had a thousand lives I’d lay them all down for Jesus!”

Knowing the brutal nature of her husband—a butcher by trade—she was quite prepared for the worst that might happen to her, but God kept her in utter and perfect peace when she actually saw flames issuing from the oven She was even *joyful* as she opened the door to death.

Then, to her unspeakable astonishment, she saw her husband upon his knees, beseeching God to pardon his sins He caught her in his arms, crying, “Forgive me, wife; oh, forgive me if you can!” turning from her only to cry yet more earnestly to God for the mercy he had been led by the Spirit Himself to seek.

With here and there such incidents to cheer him, Fletcher found, after two years of rough work and numberless hindrances, that public respect was taking the place of open opposition, and the word of truth, sown in difficulty and hardness, was beginning to bring forth fruit in many hearts Wesley says of him:—

“Having chosen this narrow field of action, he was more and more abundant in his ministerial labours, both in public and in private, not contenting himself with preaching, but visiting his flock in every corner of his parish And this work he attended to, early and late, whether the weather was fair or foul, regarding neither heat nor cold, rain nor snow, whether he was on horseback or on foot But this farther weakened his constitution, which was still more effectively done by his intense and uninterrupted studies, in which he frequently continued with scarce any intermission fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen hours a day But still he did not allow himself such food as was necessary to sustain nature He seldom took any regular meals, except he had company; otherwise, twice or thrice in four and twenty hours he ate some bread and cheese or fruit Instead of this, he sometimes took a draught of milk, and then wrote on again When one reproved him for not affording himself a sufficiency of necessary food, he replied, 'Not allow myself food? Why, our food seldom costs my housekeeper and me together less than two shillings a week!'"

CHAPTER XIII.

The Orphan Home

Isolated as was the life she lived at Hoxton, Mary Bosanquet was not wholly severed from her parents. At intervals her father would drive up in his carriage, bringing her some present and renewing his persuasions to her to live at home upon the terms of spiritual silence on which he had previously insisted. But though, to all appearance peculiarly alone, the two years spent in her solitary lodging was a time of the richest blessing, during which she entered into such communion with God as influenced the whole of her after-life.

An almost curious sensitiveness to the sorrows and needs of men so possessed her that all consideration of self or repining at her condition was entirely shut out, and with this insight into the woe of the world came a wonderful baptism of Divine love. God became all in all to her soul, and she lived in the spirit of Gerhard's inspired hymn:—

Oh, grant that nothing in my soul
May dwell but Thy pure love alone;
Oh, may Thy love possess me whole,
My joy, my treasure, and my crown!
Strange flames far from my heart remove,
My every act, word, thought, be *love*!

It was inevitable that her Methodist friends should suggest to her a less lonely life; some of them, indeed, went so far as to speak of her in connection with Mr. Fletcher.

“Ah, if I were to marry *him*,” she thought, “he would be a help and not a hindrance to my soul!”

She little knew that Fletcher had been fighting the same thought. Indeed, it was not long after this that, in answer to Charles Wesley's practical

suggestion, that a wife would be helpful in his lonely work, Fletcher drew up as quaint a set of *Reasons for and Against Matrimony* as have ever been committed to paper:—

For.

1 A tender friendship is, after the love of Christ, the greatest felicity of life; and a happy marriage is nothing but such a friendship between two persons of different sexes.

2 A wife might deliver me from the cares of housekeeping, *etc.*

3 Some objections and scandals may be avoided by marriage.

4 A pious and zealous wife might be as useful as myself; nay, she might be much more so among my female parishioners, who greatly want an inspectress.

Against.

1 Death will shortly end all particular friendships The happier the state of marriage, the more afflicting is the widowhood; besides, we may try a friend and reject him after trial; but we cannot know a wife till it is too late to part with her.

2 Marriage brings after it a hundred cares and expenses; children, a family, *etc.*

3 If matrimony is not happy, it is the most fertile source of scandal.

4 I have a thousand to one to fear that a wife, instead of being a help, may be indolent, and consequently useless; or humoursome, haughty, capricious, and consequently a heavy curse.

Fortunately for Mary Bosanquet, towards the end of these two years there came to London her friend Mrs. Ryan (housekeeper of Wesley's new Room

at Bristol), who fell ill, was nursed by her with great devotion, and afterwards taken home to share her rooms.

“I acknowledge,” she writes, “I neither gained honour, gold, nor indulgence to the flesh by uniting myself to a sickly, persecuted saint; but I gained such a spiritual helper as I shall eternally praise God for.”

Shortly after their union a house of Miss Bosanquet’s at Leytonstone became vacant, and in March, 1763, the Friends moved into it, and began private and public meetings under their own roof-tree.

One evening, as Miss Bosanquet was speaking to a large company assembled in her kitchen, the fore-gate bell clashed with a mighty peal. The servant went to answer it, and meantime there strode through the back door into the kitchen four ill-looking men with clubs in their hands. The servant hurried back trembling, saying that a messenger had come to warn them of a great mob coming to upset them, the ringleaders being four men with clubs.

Mary Bosanquet cast a glance at her audience and answered the maid aloud, “Oh, we do not mind mobs when we are about our Master’s business. ‘Greater is He that is for us than all that can be against us.’” Then calmly she continued her subject, unhindered by any.

Having upon her table a few copies of the simple “Rules for the Society of the People called Methodists,” she handed one of them to each of the four ringleaders, begging their acceptance that at their leisure they might see the nature of the profession made by the worshippers. They received them with respectful bows, and no more was heard of “mobs” for that night.

The house was a lonely one, open on one side to the forest, and in it at that time lived only Mary Bosanquet, Mrs. Ryan, a maid, and Sally Lawrence, a little child of four years, whom Miss Bosanquet had taken from her mother’s coffin to her own warm care. When the nights became dark, a disorderly crowd would gather at the gate to pelt the worshippers with dirt, afterwards invading the yard to reach the unshuttered windows, where they would roar like so many wild beasts. But the protecting hand of God kept

them from any real bodily harm “The Lord was with us,” wrote the lady of the house most sweetly, “and preserved us under Love’s almighty shade.”

Little Sally was the first of many orphans who followed Through various misfortunes and deaths around her, Miss Bosanquet quickly found herself mothering six of them The number grew until twenty children and several grown people found a home beneath her hospitable roof at one time. This family involved much nursing, for there were never more than six in the house in perfect health.

Miss Bosanquet adopted for the whole household what was almost a uniform of dark purple cotton; she fed them upon simple diet, kept them to regular hours for meals and employment, trained the children for service, and nursed sick people until they were well Hers was indeed a House of Mercy!

CHAPTER XIV.

A Seeker after God

Five years had passed since Fletcher entered Madeley as its Vicar, and with the result of his labours he was anything but satisfied.

Of the fifth year he wrote: "This last year has been the worst I have had here—barren in convictions, fruitful in backslidings." And to the same correspondent (Miss Hatton, of Wem) he wrote later:—

"The coming of Mr. Wesley's preachers into my parish gives me no uneasiness. As I am sensible that everybody does better, and is more acceptable than myself, I should be sorry to deprive anyone of a blessing; and I rejoice that the work of God goes on, by *any instrument*, or in *any place*."

This was characteristic of him—ever depreciative of self, and rejoicing in other men's labours.

Not only Wesley's itinerants, but the great preacher himself visited Madeley, and it is significant that the straight-speaking old man did not take the same pessimistic view of Fletcher's work as he did himself. After preaching to crowds of his people, Wesley speaks of Madeley as a great and encouraging "prospect." "There are many adversaries indeed," writes the Father of Methodism, "but yet they cannot shut the open and effectual door."

It was not for lack of invitation, but rather because he was so engrossed in his work that the Vicar of Madeley had up to this time confined his labours to his own parish. Now, however, he was persuaded to make an evangelistic visit to Breedon, in Leicestershire, also to Bath and Bristol.

While in Bath—conducting an extension of the opening services of Lady Huntingdon's new chapel—he wrote his first Pastoral Letter to his flock at

home Never were letters written less to please the ear, or to make a bid for the affections of a people; honest, faithful exhortations they were, plain to hurting-point, but made of wonderful blessing to those to whom they were read A sample of one will be of interest:—

“Some of you wonder why you cannot believe, why you cannot see Jesus with the eye of your mind, and delight in Him with the affections of your heart I apprehend the reason to be one of these, or perhaps altogether:—

“1 You are not poor, lost, undone, helpless, despairing sinners in yourselves. You indulge spiritual and refined self-righteousness; you are not yet dead to the law, and quite slain by the commandment Now the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to none but the poor in spirit Jesus came to save none but the lost What wonder, then, if Jesus is little to you, and if you do not live in His kingdom of peace, righteousness, and joy in the Holy Ghost?

“2 Perhaps you spend your time in curious reasonings, instead of casting yourselves as forlorn sinners at the feet of Christ, leaving it to Him to bless you when and in the manner He pleases. Know that He is the wise and Sovereign God, and that it is your duty to lie before Him as clay, as fools, as sinful nothings.

“3 Perhaps, also, some of you wilfully keep idols of one kind or another; you indulge some sin against light and knowledge; and it is neither matter of humiliation nor of confession to you The love of praise, that of the world, that of money, and that of sensual gratifications, when not lamented, are as implacable enemies to Christ as Judas and Herod were How can ye believe, seeing ye seek the honour that cometh from men? Hew, then, your Agags in pieces before the Lord Run from your Delilahs to Jesus resolutely Cut off the right hand and pluck out the right eye that offends you ‘Come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and I will receive you.’ Nevertheless, when you strive, take care not to make yourself a righteousness of your own striving. Remember that justifying righteousness is finished and brought in, and that your goodness can no more add to it than your sins diminish it Shout then, ‘the Lord your righteousness!’ And if you are undone sinners, humbly, and yet boldly, say, ‘In the Lord have I righteousness and strength.’”

There was no false comforting, or fine talk about “only believe” with John Fletcher! If any lacked faith, he cut down to the roots to find out why.

The preaching tours named were followed by many others London, Brighton, and Oathall were visited, in the first of which he officiated for Whitefield in Tottenham Court Road Chapel.

We may judge by a letter to Whitefield that he would have gone yet more frequently if he could, as he remarks, “I should be glad to be your curate some time this year, but I see no opening, nor the least prospect of any What between the dead and the living, *a parish ties one down more than a wife.*”

He was not without distinguished visitors at the vicarage, however, hostess though he had none; the Countess of Huntingdon, accompanied by Lady Anne Erskine and Miss Orton, accepted the frugal provision for comfort with which John Wesley had previously contented himself; the scarlet coat and gold lace of a famous officer of Dragoons (Captain Scott) was seen in his garden—a man, by the way, who preached daily to his soldiers, and frequently exhorted in a Methodist meeting-house in the full blaze of his regimentals—and was mounted by Fletcher upon his horse-block to address large crowds which gathered to hear him Whitefield was also expected, but could not then avail himself of the invitation, and, later on, he differed very seriously from the Vicar regarding the doctrine of free salvation which it was ever his glory to preach.

Before and beyond everything else John Fletcher was *a seeker after God*. To assist himself in this supreme endeavour he drew up the following rules for nightly use:—

1 Did I awake spiritual, and was I watchful in keeping my mind from wandering this morning when I was rising?

2 Have I this day got nearer to God in times of prayer, or have I given way to a lazy, idle spirit?

3 Has my faith been weakened by unwatchfulness, or quickened by diligence this day?

4 Have I this day walked by faith and eyed God in all things?

5 Have I denied myself in all unkind words and thoughts? Have I delighted in seeing others preferred before me?

6 Have I made the most of my precious time, as far as I had light, strength, and opportunity?

7 Have I kept the issues of my heart in the means of grace, so as to profit by them?

8 What have I done this day for the souls and bodies of God's dear saints?

9 Have I laid out anything to please myself when I might have saved the money for the cause of God?

10 Have I governed well my tongue this day, remembering that "in a multitude of words there wanteth not sin"?

11 In how many instances have I denied myself this day?

12 Do my life and conversation adorn the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

By way of encouraging others to keep themselves thus in touch with God, Fletcher formed what he called a *Religious Society*, into whose fellowship he brought all he could whom he found desirous of living the life of full salvation which he everywhere advocated. He laid before them a set of home-questions which he urged upon them as a useful form of self-examination. A sample of these will show how practical was the religion he both lived and preached.

"Do I feel any pride? Am I dead to all desire of praise? If any despise me, do I like them the worse for it? Or if they love and approve me, do I love them more on that account? Is Christ the life of all my affections and designs, as my soul is the life of my body? Have I always the presence of God?...Am I saved from the fear of man? .. Am I always ready to confess Christ, to suffer with His people, and to die for His sake?...Am I willing to give up my ease and convenience to oblige others, or do I expect them to do

so to my hours, ways, and customs?...Do I never take that glory to myself which belongs to Christ?...Am I courteous, not severe; suiting myself to all with sweetness; striving to give no one pain, but to gain and win all for their good?...Do I perform the most servile offices, such as require labour and humiliation, with cheerfulness?...Is every thought brought into subjection to Christ?...Do I think no evil, listen to no groundless surmises, nor judge from appearances? How am I in my sleep? If Satan presents any evil imagination, does my will immediately resist or give way to it? Do I bear the infirmities of age or sickness without seeking to repair the decays of nature by strong liquors? Or do I make Christ my sole support, casting the burden of a feeble body into the arms of His mercy?"

CHAPTER XV.

Sanctified Letter-Writing.

Fletcher's correspondence was an unusually heavy one; his letters make quite as spiritual reading as his sermons, yet he gave the choicest of reasons for *not* writing to one man who expected a letter: "Tell Mr. Keen," he wrote to Whitefield, "I am a letter in his debt, and *postpone writing it till I have had such a sight of Christ as to breathe His love through every line.*"

Many pearls of thought were contained in these epistles; while the advice in them was quaintly put, it was always helpful, and never hurled at random.

"Your dulness in private prayer," wrote he to Miss Hatton, "arises from the want of familiar friendship with Jesus To obviate it, go to your closet as if you were going to meet your dearest friend; cast yourself at His feet, bemoan your coldness, extol His love to you, and let your heart break with a desire to love Him Get *recollection* —a dwelling within ourselves—a being abstracted from the creature and turned towards God For want of such a frame, our times of prayer are frequently dry and useless; imagination prevails, and the heart wanders, whereas we pass easily from recollection to delightful prayer."

To the same person, however, he recommended the cultivation of a wholesome naturalness in religion which would ensure acknowledgment of its beauty in those around her:—

"There is no sin in *looking cheerful*. 'Rejoice evermore'; and if it is our duty always to be *filled with joy*, it is our duty to *appear* what we are in reality I hope, however, your friends know how to distinguish between *cheerfulness* and *levity*.

"Beware of stiff singularity in things *barely indifferent*: it is *self* in disguise; and it is so much the more dangerous when it comes recommended by a serious, self-denying, religious appearance."

It is evident from a glance at his correspondence that Fletcher's extremely frugal habits and large generosity to others gave not a little anxiety to those who loved him. A wealthy merchant of Bristol, named Mr. Ireland, a constant, true, and close friend, sent him a parcel of broadcloth as a gift, beseeching him kindly not to send his coat again to be patched. His thanks were thus concluded:—

“Your broadcloth can lap me round two or three times; but the mantle of Divine love, the precious fine robe of Jesus's righteousness, can cover your soul a thousand times. The cloth, fine and good as it is, will not keep out a hard shower; but that garment of salvation will keep out even a shower of brimstone and fire. Your cloth will wear out; but that fine linen, the righteousness of saints, will appear with a finer lustre the more it is worn. The moth may fret your present, or the tailor may spoil it in cutting it, but the present which Jesus has made you is out of reach of the spoiler, and ready for present wear. Let me beseech you, my dear friend, to accept of this heavenly present as I accept of your earthly one. I did not send you one farthing to purchase it; it came unsought, unasked, unexpected, as the seed of the woman came. It came just as I was sending a tailor to buy me cloth for a new coat, and I hope when you next see me it will be in your present; now let Jesus see you in His. Accept it freely. Wear no more the old rusty coat of nature and self-righteousness. Send no more to have it *patched*. Make your boast of an unbought suit, and love to wear the livery of Jesus.”

John Fletcher's letters all tended to the same point as his sermons—a personal appeal to the soul to whom he addressed himself. To the Rev Joseph Benson he wrote:—

“The few professors I see in these parts are so far from what I could wish them and myself to be, that I cannot but cry out, 'Lord, how long wilt Thou give Thine heritage to desolation and barrenness? How long shall the heathen say, Where is now their indwelling God?' I hope it is better with you in the north. What are your heart, your pen, your tongue doing? Are they receiving, sealing, spreading the truth everywhere within your sphere? Are you dead to praise or dispraise? Could you quietly pass for a mere fool, and have gross nonsense fathered upon you without any uneasy reflection of self? The Lord bless you! Beware of your grand enemy, earthly wisdom and

unbelieving reasonings You will never overcome but by child-like, loving simplicity.”

In writing to his schoolmaster at Madeley, the Vicar gives a real home-thrust, yet in so kindly a manner that it could hardly be resented:—

“If I were not a minister I would be a *schoolmaster*, to have the pleasure of bringing up children in the fear of the Lord. That pleasure is yours, relish it, and it will comfort and strengthen you in your work The joy of the Lord and of charity is our strength Salute the children from me, and tell them I long to show them the way to happiness and Heaven Have you mastered the stiffness and shyness of your temper? Charity gives a *meekness, an affability, a child-like simplicity and openness*, which nature has denied you Let me find you shining by these virtues, and you will revive me much God bless your labour about the sheep and the lambs!”

An insight into his own persevering way of working may well be gained from the directions he give’s in a letter written from Bristol to Mr. Wase, of Madeley:—

“*My dear brother*,—Go to Mrs. Cound, and tell her I charge her, in the name of God, to give up the world, to set out with all speed for Heaven, and to join the few about her who fear God If she refuses, call again; call weekly, if not daily, and warn her from me till she is ripe for glory... Give my love to George Crannage; tell him to make haste to Christ, and not to doze away his last days.”

To the whole of his parishioners he wrote, on one occasion, an epistle through which we gain a glimpse of the tenderness and beauty of his spirit, chastened still more, as it then was, by affliction:—

“*My dear companions in tribulation*,—All the children of God I love; but of all the children of God, none have so great a right, to my love as you Your stated or occasional attendance on my poor ministry, as well as the bonds of neighbourhood, and the many happy hours I have spent with you before the throne of Grace, endear you peculiarly to me. . . .

“I sometimes feel a desire of being buried where you are buried, and of having my bones lie in a common earthen bed with yours; but I soon resign that wish, and exult in thinking that, whatever distance there may be between our graves, we can now bury our sins, cares, doubts, and fears, in the one grave of our Divine Saviour. If I, your poor unworthy shepherd, am smitten, be not scattered, but rather be more closely gathered unto Christ, and keep near each other in faith and love, till you all receive our second Comforter and Advocate, the Holy Ghost, the third Person in our *Covenant God*. He is with you; but if you plead the promise of the Father, ‘which,’ says Christ, ‘ye have heard of Me, He will be *in* you.’ He will fill your souls with His light, love, and glory, according to that verse which we have so often sung together:—

“Refining Fire, go through my heart,
Illuminate my soul;
Scatter Thy life through every part,
And sanctify the whole.

“This indwelling of the Comforter perfects the mystery of sanctification in the believer’s soul. This is the highest blessing of the Christian covenant on earth. Rejoicing in God our Creator, in God our Redeemer, let us look for the full comfort of God our Sanctifier. So shall we live and die in the faith, going on from faith to faith, from strength to strength, from comfort to comfort, till Christ is all in all to us all.”

CHAPTER XVI.

An unfortunate purchase

Mary Bosanquet was doomed to suffer through her friends. She was greatly tried by interfering advisers, and through ill-given counsel she took steps which caused anxieties to thicken and debts to accumulate. It was anything but an easy life, yet it was illuminated by wonderful answers to prayer. On one occasion she had to find a large sum of money in the course of a day or two.

“You had better borrow it until your own half-yearly cheque comes in,” said Mrs. Ryan.

They tried, but were unsuccessful. Miss Bosanquet went to prayer, and it seemed to her as if the Lord Jesus Christ stood by her side and repeated some words she had lately read: “Christ charges Himself with all your temporal affairs, while you charge yourself with those that relate to His glory.” Such power accompanied the utterance as “wiped away every care,” as she put it to herself. While yet she thanked her Lord for His promise a knock came to her door. A man had called to bring her just the amount she needed.

Not a little trouble came to Mary Bosanquet through a Miss Lewen who stayed in her house, received much good, and was nursed through an illness which proved unto death.

Many ill-natured persons credited the kindly hostess with an effort to secure Miss Lewen’s fortune for her work, but the reverse was the case, she having cost the little House of Mercy many pounds without contributing anything towards it.

A man named Richard Taylor was her next trial—a debtor and improvident, with a wife and family of small children. Being recommended to her good graces, he stayed for a time in her household while trying to arrange with

his creditors He accompanied Miss Bosanquet, Mrs. Ryan, and Mrs. Crosby upon a troublesome journey to Yorkshire, taken with the double purpose of benefiting Sarah Ryan's fast-failing health, and of seeking a larger and more suitable Orphan Home than the one in Leytonstone. The latter object was accomplished, but Mrs. Ryan gradually sank, and to her friend's great sorrow they had to bury her in the old churchyard of Leeds.

The northern Home involved three times the work required by the other; wheat had to be ground to flour before home-made bread could be baked, cows managed and milked, men-servants overlooked; all the details, in fact, of a country house and a large household came under review This alone would have brought more than enough responsibility, but on the advice of Richard Taylor and another Yorkshire friend, Miss Bosanquet unfortunately bought a farm with malt-kilns attached, and began to build a house suitable for the size of her family.

The investment turned out an unhappy failure The work of God prospered mightily, but the settling of Taylor's affairs cost her between £200 and £300; the house was an inn-of-call for all Methodists travelling through the district (which could not be without incurring much expense); the farm and kilns swallowed increasingly large sums of money, and Taylor was an extravagant manager.

Had it not been for the unfailing kindness and help of a gentleman who many times proposed to Miss Bosanquet in vain, she would have come out of the affair penniless Friends greatly urged this marriage upon her Her rule in these cases was to ask herself, "Should I be holier or happier with this man?" The answer was invariably "No!" and in this particular instance the thought of her saintly friend at Madeley arose to make the idea doubly disagreeable to her.

In great distress, she began to live on bread and water in order to economise, and go no further into debt, but the night following this forlorn effort God came very near and comforted her with the promise of deliverance in a way she knew not. She says:—

"He showed me (by a light on my understanding) that all my trials were appointed by Himself; that they were laid on by weight and measure, and

should go no farther than they would work for my good.. I had depended on creatures for help, and therefore He had let me feel the weight of my burdens, that I might be constrained to cast them afresh on Him; and that, when He had proved and tried me, He would deliver me from all my outward burdens. As a pledge of the inward liberty He would afterwards bring me into, and that the ways and means of my deliverance were in His own hands, and should appear in the appointed time, those words were again brought powerfully to my mind—'If thou ...put away iniquity far from thy tabernacles... Yea, the Almighty shall be thy defence, and thou shalt have plenty of silver...and shalt lift up thy face unto God.... Thou shalt also decree a thing, and it shall be established unto thee; and the light shall shine upon thy ways.'...It was a profitable and melting time."

Thus, even in the midst of her troubles, was Mary Bosanquet comforted of God.

CHAPTER XVII.

The College of Trevecca.

An important episode in the life of John Fletcher was his association with the College of Trevecca, opened by the Countess of Huntingdon, for young men who desired to devote themselves to the service of Christ. A gratuitous education for three years, with lodging, board, and clothing, was provided for each student, the young men being afterwards free to enter whatever church they preferred.

Above all, it was important that the College should have a President whose advice could be relied upon concerning the choice, conduct and work of both masters and students—practically an unsalaried head of affairs. To this post was called the Vicar of Madeley, and though naturally unable to be resident in the College, he accepted the duties of President, and, as such, gave most valuable service.

A little later than this Fletcher undertook to be Chaplain (one of three) to the Earl of Buchan, who was known as one of the most devoted Christians of his rank.

Notwithstanding these duties, Fletcher's work became increasingly itinerant in character. Wesley says:—

“For many years he regularly preached at places eight, ten, and sixteen miles off, returning the same night, though he seldom got home before one or two in the morning. At a little Society which he had gathered about six miles from Madeley, he preached two or three times a week, beginning at five in the morning... In some of his journeys he had not only difficulties, but dangers likewise, to encounter. One day, as he was riding over a wooden bridge, just as he got to the middle thereof, it broke in. The mare's forelegs sank into the river, but her breast and hinder parts were kept up by the bridge. In that position she lay as still as if she had been dead, till he got over her neck and took off his bags, in which were several MSS., the

spoiling of which would have occasioned much trouble. He then endeavoured to raise her up, but she would not stir till he went over the other part of the bridge. But no sooner did he set his feet upon the ground than she began to plunge. Immediately the remaining part of the bridge broke down and sunk with her into the river. But presently she rose and swam to him.”

Other adventures befell Fletcher in his travels, some of them ending in the narrowest escapes from injury and death.

In the early part of the year 1770 Fletcher visited Italy, France, and his native Switzerland, with his friend Mr. Ireland. Few details are preserved, but it seems to have been an uncommonly lively tour. Mr. Ireland tells of the Vicar’s enthusiasm for unmasking various practices of the Italian priests, which placed them frequently in danger of their lives.

During this trip they met with a classical scholar who said he had “travelled all over Europe, and had passed through all the societies in England to find a person whose life corresponded with the Gospels and with Paul’s Epistles.” Almost defiantly he demanded of Mr. Ireland if he knew a single clergyman or Dissenting minister in his native land possessed of £100 a year who would not desert his living for any other if offered double that amount. Mr. Ireland triumphantly pointed to his travelling companion, saying, “*That man would not!*”

The traveller turned to Mr. Fletcher and began a religious argument, which the two kept up at intervals for a whole week. The Vicar overcame his opponent again and again, and though the latter lost his temper continually over his repeated defeats, the calm, sweet reasonableness of Fletcher’s spirit, as much as the overwhelming weight of his arguments for Jesus Christ, made a lasting impression upon his mind. Eight years later he showed his appreciation by becoming the Vicar’s host in Provence, and treating him with the greatest reverence and attention.

While in Paris he was sent for to visit a sick woman. Information having been given to a magistrate which ascribed to him wrong motives, a garbled case was got up, and an order of apprehension was issued from the King. An officer called at the house where the friends were staying to serve the order

Mr. Ireland stepped out and, without mentioning his name, said quietly, "Sir, have you an order for me?" "I have," responded the officer, taking him for Fletcher. They went off together, and Mr. Fletcher was well out of the city before the magistrate disgustedly discovered the mistake.

When in the south of France, Fletcher determined to visit the Protestants of the Cevennes Mountains, and nothing would serve him but that he should perform the long and difficult journey on foot, with but a staff in his hand. He disdained to appear well cared for, and on horseback, at the doors of those whose fathers were hunted for their faith from rock to rock. He set out in his own fashion, therefore; on the first night of his travels begging the use of a chair in some humble cottage until morning. The peasant was reluctant to admit his strange guest, but when he had heard him talk and pray, himself, no less than his wife and children, were affected to tears. "I nearly refused to let a stranger into my house," related the peasant to his neighbours, "but when he came I found more angel than man."

Nor was this the only person who held such an opinion. Wesley tells of another visit paid by the Vicar upon his way to call upon a minister of the district. A little crowd was assembled at the door of a house where a mother and her newly-born child were dying. The room was also filled with neighbours. Fletcher went in, spoke gently to the people present of the effects of the sin of our first parent, and pointed them to Jesus. "Jesus!" he exclaimed, "He is able to raise the dead, to save you all from sin, to save these from death. Come, let us ask Him!"

In prayer he had wondrous liberty. The child's convulsions ceased, the mother became easy, and strength flowed into her as he prayed. The neighbours gazed astonished, and silently withdrew, whispering to one another when without the house, "*Certainly it was an angel!*"

On their journey from France to Italy the travellers arrived at the Appian Way. Fletcher stopped the carriage and descended, remarking to his friend, "I cannot *ride* over ground where the Apostle Paul once *walked*, chained to a soldier;" and taking off his hat he walked up the old Roman road praising God for the glorious Gospel preached by His servant of long ago.

Nor was this affectation upon Fletcher's part Nothing was further from his thoughts at any time than to *make an impression* upon those around him Perhaps for this very reason the mark he did make was indelible No man ever spent an hour with the Vicar of Madeley without being spiritually better for it.

Arrived at Nyon, he was pressed to occupy several pulpits Crowds flocked after him from place to place, sinners were awakened, scoffers silenced, and many were brought to seek Jesus as the only Saviour.

One aged minister besought him to prolong his visit, if only for an additional week. When assured it was impossible, he turned to Mr. Ireland with tears running down his cheeks "Oh, sir," he exclaimed, "how unfortunate for my country! During my lifetime it has produced but one angel of a man, and now it is our lot to. lose him."

The parting from these good people was almost overwhelming Some of the multitude which gathered to say good-bye followed the carriage for over two miles, unwilling to lose sight of one who had brought them so near to God.

More than ordinary welcome awaited him at Trevecca Joseph Benson—headmaster of the College, and Fletcher's biographer in latter days— wrote of it thus:—

"He was received as an angel of God It is not possible for me to describe the veneration in which we all held him Like Elijah in the schools of the prophets, he was revered; he was loved; he was almost adored; not only by every student, but by every member of the family.

"And, indeed, he was worthy. . . Though by the body he was tied down to earth, *his whole conversation was in Heaven*. His *life*, from day to day, was *hid with Christ in God*. Prayer, praise, love, and zeal, all ardent, elevated above what one would think attainable in this state of frailty, were the element in which he continually lived As to others, his one employment was to call, entreat and urge them to ascend with him to the glorious source of being and blessedness. He had leisure, comparatively, for nothing else. Languages, arts, sciences, grammar, rhetoric, logic, even divinity itself,

were all laid aside when he appeared in the schoolroom among the students. His full heart would not suffer him to be silent. He *must* speak, and they were readier to hearken to this servant and minister of Jesus Christ than to attend to Sallust, Virgil, Cicero, or any Latin or Greek historian, poet, or philosopher they had been engaged in reading And they seldom hearkened long before they were all in tears, and every heart caught lire from the flame that burned in his soul.

“These seasons generally terminated in this Being convinced that to be ‘filled with the Holy Ghost’ was a better qualification for the ministry of the Gospel than any classical learning...after speaking awhile in the schoolroom, he used frequently to say, ‘As many of you as are athirst for the fulness of the Spirit, follow me into my room.’ On this, many of us instantly followed him, and there continued till noon, *for two or three hours*, praying for one another till we could bear to kneel no longer... I have sometimes seen him...so filled with the love of God that he cried out, ‘O my God, withhold Thy hand, or the vessel will burst!’ But he afterwards told me he was afraid he had grieved the Spirit of God, and that he ought to have prayed that the Lord would have enlarged the vessel, or have suffered it to break, that the soul might have had no further bar to its enjoyment of the Supreme Good.”

Few headmasters have had the opportunity to speak of the President of their college as the headmaster of Trevecca was led to do of Fletcher.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A Pen of Power

Early in the new year of 1771 the happy relations of Fletcher and Wesley with the Countess of Huntingdon were shattered by unfortunate differences in theology, Mr. Fletcher, held by certain utterances of Wesley against Calvinistic doctrine, finding himself, as a result, obliged to resign his Presidency of Trevecca College. Circumstances, regretted most of all by himself, drew Fletcher into a long Calvinian controversy, and to the publication of his famous “Checks to Antinomianism,” and remarkable and closely-reasoned vindication of the doctrines by which he held, abounding in the plainest of plain speech.

The Calvinian controversy was long and bitter, being succeeded by a Unitarian controversy, which became equally prominent. Both disturbances were productive of much discussion, of many pamphlets, of “Vindications,” and “Answers,” and “Circulars,” and “Letters.” Into this word-war Fletcher was drawn much against his own preference, but when once the fight had been entered upon, it was almost impossible for him to extricate himself until it was fought out.

“What a world!” he wrote to Benson; “methinks I dream when I reflect that I have written on controversy; the last subject I thought I should have meddled with I expect to be smartly taken in hand and soundly drubbed for it Lord, prepare me for it, and for everything that may make me cease from man, and, above all, from your unworthy servant.”

Enemies there were, not a few, who rejoiced at an opportunity of hurling abuse at a good man—some of the sharp and stinging things they said amounted to actual slander. To know how keen was the fight, how bitter and provoking the attacks made, one must read the correspondence and pamphlets then issued; but in the midst of it all Wesley was able to write of his friend:—

“I rejoice not only in the abilities, but in the temper, of Mr. Fletcher He writes as he lives I cannot say that I know such another clergyman in England or Ireland He is all fire, but it is the fire of love His writings, like his constant conversation, breathe nothing else, to those who read him with an impartial eye.”

The controversy was much to be deplored on account of the personal element brought in at all points, yet Fletcher’s clear and eloquent writings in his “Checks” was a fine service rendered to the Christian faith Once more to quote Wesley:—

“In his ‘Checks to Antinomianism,’ one knows not which to admire most—the *purity* of the language, the *strength* and *clearness* of the argument, or the *mildness* and *sweetness* of the spirit that breathes through the whole Insomuch that I nothing wonder at a serious clergyman, who, being resolved to live and die in his own opinion, when he was pressed to read them, replied, ‘No, I will never read Mr. Fletcher’s “Checks,” for if I did I should be of his mind.’”

In January, 1773, a memorial letter was written to the Vicar of Madeley by John Wesley, asking him to become his successor as leader and head of the Methodist people Indeed, the venerable Father of Methodism would have had his instant aid, for his letter concludes:—

“Without conferring, therefore, with flesh and blood, come and strengthen the hands, comfort the heart, and share the labour of “Your affectionate friend and brother, “*John Wesley*.”

Fletcher’s response was tentative; not wholly a refusal, yet not an acceptance:—

“I would not leave this place,” he concluded, in reply, “without a fuller persuasion that the time is *quite* come Not that God uses me much here, but I have not yet sufficiently cleared my conscience from the blood of all men. Meantime, I beg the Lord to guide me by His counsel, and make me willing to go anywhere, or nowhere, to be anything, or nothing.

“Help by your prayers till you can bless by word of mouth, Rev. and dear Sir, your willing, though unprofitable servant in the Gospel.

“*J. Fletcher.*”

Wesley was greatly against his saintly friend hiding his light under the bushel of a country vicarage Thirteen years later he wrote his own opinion of Fletcher’s mission:—

“He was full as much called to sound an alarm through all the nation as Mr. Whitefield himself Nay, abundantly more so, seeing he was far better qualified for that important work. He had a more striking person, equally good breeding, an equally winning address, together with a richer flow of fancy, a stronger understanding; a far greater treasure of learning, both in languages, philosophy, philology, and divinity; and, above all (which I can speak with fuller assurance, because I had a thorough knowledge both of one and the other), a more deep and constant communion with the Father, and with the Son, Jesus Christ.”

Before a year had passed Fletcher’s health began to fail, and he was glad to devote himself to the writing which proved so useful and convincing. To Mr. Ireland he wrote:—

“My throat is not formed for the labours of preaching When I have preached three or four times together it inflames and fills up; and the efforts which I am then obliged to make heat my blood Thus I am, by nature, as well as by the circumstances I am in, obliged to employ my time in writing a little O that I may be enabled to do it to the glory of God!”

Perhaps nothing he wrote more fully conduced to that lofty purpose than his famous “Polemical Essay on the Twin Doctrines of Christian Imperfection and a Death Purgatory”; than which few clearer, more convincing, or more able vindications of Scriptural holiness have ever been written Can aught be plainer than the definition of Christian perfection which follows:—

“...Christian perfection is nothing but the depth of evangelical repentance, the full assurance of faith, and the pure love of God and man shed abroad in a faithful believer’s heart, by the Holy Ghost given unto him, to cleanse

him, and to keep him clean, 'from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit'; and to enable him to fulfil the law of Christ' according to the talents he is entrusted with, and the circumstances in which he is placed in this world... This is evident from the descriptions of Christian perfection which we find in the New Testament."

In a practical, almost homely, manner, Fletcher deals with questions we often hear put to-day. For instance :—

"How many baptisms, or effusions of the sanctifying Spirit, are necessary to cleanse a believer from all sin, and to kindle his soul into perfect love?... If you asked your physician how many doses of physic you must take before all the crudities of your stomach can be carried off, and your appetite perfectly restored, he would probably answer you that this depends upon the nature of those crudities, the strength of the medicine, and the manner in which your constitution will allow it to operate, and that, in general, you must repeat the dose, as you can bear, till the remedy has fully answered the desired end I return a similar answer: If one powerful baptism of the Spirit 'seals you unto the day of redemption,' and 'cleanses you from all' moral 'filthiness,' so much the better If two or more are necessary, the Lord can repeat them.

"Which is the way to Christian perfection? Shall we go to it by internal stillness, agreeably to the direction of Moses and David ... or shall we press after it by an internal wrestling according to the commands of Christ?... The way to perfection is by the due combination of prevenient, assisting free grace, and of submissive, assisted free will... 'God worketh in you to will and to do,' says St. Paul Here he describes the passive office of faith, which submits to, and acquiesces in, every divine dispensation and operation. 'Therefore work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,' and, of consequence, with haste, diligence, ardour, and faithfulness... Would ye then wait aright for Christian perfection? Impartially admit the two Gospel axioms, and faithfully reduce them to practice In order to this, let them meet in your hearts, as the two legs of a pair of compasses meet in the rivet which makes them one compound instrument... When your heart quietly rests in God by faith, as it steadily acts the part of a passive receiver, it resembles the leg of the compasses which rests in the centre of a circle;

and then the poet's expressions, 'restless, resigned' ("*Restless, resigned, for God I wait; for God my vehement soul stands still.*"—Wesley), describes its fixedness in God But when your heart swiftly moves towards God by faith, as it acts the part of a diligent worker; when your ardent soul follows after God, as a thirsty deer does after the water-brooks, it may be compared to the leg of the compasses which traces the circumference of a circle; and then these words of the poet, 'restless' and 'vehement,' properly belong to it.

"Is Christian perfection to be instantaneously brought down to us? or are we gradually to grow up to it? Shall we be made perfect in love by an habit of holiness suddenly infused into us, or by acts of feeble faith and feeble love so frequently repeated as to become strong, habitual, and evangelically natural to us?"

Such are the difficulties with which Fletcher deals, patiently and fully turning them inside out, comparing and contrasting, defining and enlarging, leading the reader step by step to the conclusion that Christian perfection is essentially the perfection of *love*, love, "the highest gift of God, humble, gentle, patient love," shed abroad in the heart of the believer by the perpetual anointing of the Holy Spirit.

As he finds his climax in Wesley's words, let us read them in the sense of his own quotation:—

"All visions, revelations, manifestations whatever, are little things compared to love.... The Heaven of heavens is love There is nothing higher in religion; there is, in effect, nothing else. If you look for anything but more love, you are looking wide of the mark, you are getting out of the royal way And when you are asking others, 'Have you received this or that blessing?' if you mean any thing but more love, you mean wrong; you are leading them out of the way, and putting them upon a false scent Settle it, then, in your heart, that, from the moment God has saved you from all sin you are to aim at nothing but more of that love described in 1 Cor. xiii You can go no higher than this till you are carried into Abraham's bosom."

One of the Greenwood family, with whom Fletcher frequently stayed, made a reference to this production of his thought, which it were well to

remember: “Whoever has had the privilege of observing Mr. Fletcher’s conduct will not scruple to say that *he was a living comment on his own account of Christian perfection....* As far as man is able to judge, he did possess perfect humility, perfect resignation, and perfect love.”

CHAPTER XIX.

Failing Health

Unwilling as he might be for further controversy, Fletcher quickly discovered that he had not yet done with it Toplady, Vicar of a Devon village, and so-called author of “Rock of Ages,” bitterly attacked a tract of Mr. Wesley’s on Predestination, referring to some of his own Calvinian heresies Wesley had neither time nor inclination to wage a paper war with an angry man The work was undertaken by Fletcher, who found himself plunged afresh into the troubled waters of religious controversy. In his very Introduction Fletcher refuses to have anything to say to the personal charges vindictively hurled by his opponent:—

“These charges,” he writes, “being chiefly founded upon Mr. Toplady’s logical mistakes, they will, of their own accord, fall to the ground as soon as the mistakes on which they rest shall be exposed May the God of truth and love grant that if Mr. Toplady has the honour of producing the best arguments, I, for one, may have the advantage of yielding to them! To be conquered by truth and love is to prove conqueror over our two greatest enemies—error and sin.”

He then proceeds to deal with each of Toplady’s *seventy-three* arguments in favour of Predestination, abolishing them one by one, but in a cool, calm, reasonable way which contrasts nobly and sweetly with the angry prejudice of the other.

His preaching tours were interfered with by this work, but he deemed himself to be doing as much, if not more, for God by pouring the daylight of heavenly reason upon the errors which darkened the minds, narrowed the perspective, and burdened the hearts of so many in that day of Calvinian controversy.

Strangely enough, Fletcher’s next essay was into the arena of *political* strife—or, as he terms it, “Christian politics”—being led thereto by a pamphlet

of Wesley's upon the American War of Independence then raging He thoroughly prepared himself, not unnecessarily, for the storm which was to follow; for the minds of men were divided, and political speech has ever tended to undue licence and heat.

The Government of George *iii.*, however, considered that Fletcher had uttered words as valuable as they were timely The Secretary of State for the Colonies introduced the tract to the Lord Chancellor, and he to the King It was not long before Fletcher was asked if he would entertain the idea of any preferment in the Church; was there aught which the Lord Chancellor might do for him in this way? His reply chimed with every act of his life "I want nothing," answered the saintly man; "nothing but more grace."

It was at this time that Fletcher's health showed grievous signs of failure His arduous toil, long journeys, close writing, and insufficient food, had told all too surely upon a delicately-organised frame A violent cough beset him, with slight but frequent hæmorrhage.

John Wesley advised an open-air cure, pressing him to spend some months on horse-back, touring with him through parts of England and Scotland. They set out together in the early spring, and travelled 1,100 or 1,200 miles in this way (not, however, into Scotland), taking such journeys as were suited to the invalid's strength So greatly did he profit by some weeks in the saddle that Wesley declared if he would only have continued it for a few months longer he would have become a strong man once more.

In May, 1776, however, we find him at Bristol Hot Wells, debarred from his parochial work Wesley suggested more saddle-cure, proposing a five-hundred mile tour to Cornwall, but Fletcher had by that time resigned himself to the hands of a physician who forbade the exertion, being out of sympathy with a remedy so far in advance of the times.

This medical adviser, however, mistook his case, reducing him to great weakness A specialist who then undertook him restored his strength somewhat by more generous diet, although the relapse which followed was so serious that his friends thought him to be dying, and his congregation sang an intercessory hymn composed for the occasion.

From his multiplicity of remedies and advisers, however, Wesley rescued him once more, put him in the saddle, and led him through Oxfordshire, Northampton, and Norfolk, bringing him home greatly benefited for the open air.

Fresh-air treatment, however, needs wisely conducting in the untoward climate of England, and a self-prescribed ride upon a winter's day of bitter frost threw Fletcher again into suffering and danger. Friends nursed him in London, and a noted specialist was brought to him by Mr. Ireland, whose kindness was ever unfailing; while two or three physicians regularly attended and gave their best advice. Rest, silence, and a diet of the richest milk seemed most to help him, but it was a real sacrifice for him to hold his peace concerning the intense love of Jesus which filled his soul. Often by signs he would "stir up those about him to pray and praise."

"When he was able to converse, his favourite subject was *the promise of the Father, the gift of the Holy Ghost*, including the rich, peculiar blessing of union with the Father and the Son mentioned in the prayer of our Lord, recorded in John xvii 'We must not be content,' said he, 'to be only cleansed from sin; we must be filled with the Spirit.' One asking him, What was to be experienced in the full accomplishment of *the promise of the Father*? 'Oh,' said he, 'what shall I say? All the sweetness of the drawings of the Father, all the love of the Son, all the rich effusions of peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, more than ever can be expressed are comprehended here! To attain it, the Spirit maketh intercession in the soul, like a God wrestling with a God.'"

Fletcher's conversation had a savour all its own. He heard and saw nothing which did not in some way suggest to him the ways and love of God. He was much in the habit of spiritualising all allusions of an earthly nature, and what in some men would have sounded like *cant* was refined by his inner spirituality to sanctified quaintness. For instance, Mr. Ireland with great difficulty persuaded Fletcher to sit for his portrait. While the artist was busy, his subject used the time in exhorting all in the room to spare no pains to get the outlines and colourings of the image of Jesus impressed upon their hearts. During the barbarous blood-letting to which his physicians subjected him, he would talk very tenderly of "the precious blood-shedding of the

Lamb of God.” On being entertained in the house of a friend he besought the cook to “stir up the Divine fire of love within his heart, that it might burn up all the rubbish therein, and raise a flame of holy affection”; while he addressed the housemaid as follows: “I entreat you to sweep every corner of your heart, that it may be fit to receive your Heavenly Guest!”

The Rev Henry Venn met Fletcher at the house of Mr. Ireland, where they stayed together for six weeks Referring to this visit some years later, Mr. Venn remarked to another clergyman:—

“Sir, Mr. Fletcher was a luminary—a *luminary*, did I say? He was a *sun!* I have known all the great men for these fifty years, but I have known none like him I was intimately acquainted with him... I never heard him say a single word which was not proper to be spoken, and which had not a tendency to minister grace to the hearers... Never did I hear Mr. Fletcher speak ill of anyone He would pray for those who walked disorderly, but he would not publish their faults.”

Little wonder that both saint and sinner loved this Christly man!

CHAPTER XX.

By the Shores of Lake Lemman

Unaware of the sickness of her saintly friend (whom she had not met for fifteen years), Miss Bosanquet was one day extremely startled to be asked, “Do you know that Mr. Fletcher is dying?” She at once began to entreat the Lord for him, and while upon her knees received the assurance of James v. 15: “The prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up.”

Just at that time the Methodist Conference was held in Bristol, and Fletcher, who had returned to the ceaseless care of Mr. Ireland near by, was one day assisted by him into the assembly. A letter written by one who was present gives an interesting picture of the scene:—

“The whole assembly stood up as if moved by an electric shock. Mr. Wesley rose, *ex cathedrâ*, and advanced a few paces to receive his highly-respected friend and reverend brother, whose visage seemed strongly to bode that he stood on the verge of the grave, while his eyes, sparkling with seraphic love, indicated that he dwelt in the suburbs of Heaven... He addressed the Conference, on their work and his own views, in a strain of holy and pathetic eloquence, which no language of mine can adequately express. The influence of his spirit and pathos seemed to bear down all before it.... He had scarcely pronounced a dozen sentences before a hundred preachers, to speak in round numbers, were immersed in tears... Mr. Wesley, in order to relieve his languid friend from the fatigue and injury which might arise from a too long and arduous exertion of the lungs through much speaking, abruptly knelt down at his side, the whole congress of preachers doing the same, while, in a concise and energetic manner, he prayed for Mr. Fletcher’s restoration to health, and a longer exercise of his ministerial labours. Mr. Wesley closed his prayer with the following prophetic promise, pronounced in his peculiar manner, and with a confidence and emphasis which seemed to thrill through every heart—*‘he shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the lord?’*”

This prophecy was afterwards blessedly fulfilled.

Madeley yearned for its now beloved Vicar, and thinking that all would be well if he were only once more in their midst, one of his parishioners brought a horse, designing to walk by him all the way from Bristol to Madeley Two or three others came and entreated him to travel home in a post-chaise, but his physicians forbade his return to the scene of his old labours, and his parishioners, perforce, returned disappointed.

Miss Bosanquet thought to help the cure she now expected, and sent a favourite remedy of her own, which Fletcher acknowledged in a long letter, but did not try.

Before the year (1777) was spent, Fletcher had so far recovered his strength as to be able to travel, and, accompanied by Mr. Ireland, two of his daughters, and other friends, started for Switzerland, that once more Fletcher might breathe his native air.

A continental journey by post-chaise in December was not unlikely to prove trying, but though the axle-tree broke, and they were left on the side of a snow-covered hill with nine miles to walk in the piercing cold of a north wind, Mr. Fletcher bore the fatigue and cold as well as any of the party. By the end of February he was able to ride fifty-five miles in a day A couple of months later he was welcomed to his father's house at Nyon once more, where the sweet, pure air, much riding and plenty of goats' milk conduced to the healing process at work within him.

"We have a fine shady wood near the lake," he wrote to a friend, "where I can ride in the cool all the day, and enjoy the singing of a multitude of birds." Of the way in which he spent his time he says, "I pray, have patience, rejoice, and write when I can; I saw wood in the house when I cannot go out; and eat grapes, of which I have always a basket by me."

"I met some children in my wood gathering strawberries," runs a letter to Mr. Ireland, who had not accompanied him to Nyon; "I spoke to them about our *common* Father. We felt a touch of brotherly affection They said they would sing to their Father, as well as the birds, and followed me, attempting to make such music as you know is commonly made in these parts. I

outrode them, but some of them had the patience to follow me home, and said they would speak with me. The people of the house stopped them, saying I would not be troubled with children They cried, and said *they were sure I would not say so, for I was their good brother* The next day, when I heard this, I enquired after them, and invited them to come and see me, which they have done every day since. I make them little hymns, which they sing Some of them are under sweet drawings... Last Sunday I met them in the wood; there were a hundred of them, and as many adults Our first pastor has since desired me to desist from preaching in the wood... for fear of giving umbrage; and I have complied, from a concurrence of circumstances which are not worth mentioning; I therefore now meet them in my father's yard."

In the following winter Fletcher made an eighty-mile journey in order to assist his English medical adviser and friend, William Perronet, to secure a Swiss inheritance which he had gone to the Continent to claim Part of the distance had to be performed on a sledge through "narrow passes cut through the snow...frequently on the brinks of precipices"; some of it was traversed on foot amid hardship and danger But neither distances nor difficulties prevented Fletcher from speaking to all whom he could find ready to listen of Christ and His boundless love. William Perronet declared that he had preached the Gospel, not only by words and example, but by *looks* also, wherever he went.

From the early days of his frugal feasting upon bread and currants, Fletcher strongly believed in the plentiful use of fruit as food. His grapes were succeeded the following summer by a black-cherry diet, and for severe rheumatism he drank a decoction of pine-apple He had also great faith in exercise, riding in preference to driving, walking whenever he had strength, and when unable to go out of doors allowing himself three minutes of jumping just before dinner This may sound a curious form of exertion, yet it was recommended to him by two physicians.

Despite the blessing Fletcher was to the people around him—some of whom pleaded with him *on their knees*, with tears, to remain with them—there were many in authority who took the greatest exception to his "irregular" ways of doing good He was actually "summoned before the

Seigneur Bailiff, who sharply reprimanded him for preaching against Sabbath-breaking and stage plays.” He forbade Mr. Fletcher preaching in any of the churches of his native country. Curiously enough, the minister who led this opposition died suddenly, as he was dressing for church, and a house was given over to the Vicar’s use that he might there exhort the many who came to him for help and teaching.

While in Switzerland he composed a French poem called “La Louange” (Praise), which he afterwards enlarged under the title of “Grace and Nature,” dedicating it, by permission, “To the Queen of Great Britain.” He also wrote “The Portrait of St. Paul—the true Model for Christians and Pastors”; which was translated and published after his death.

Fletcher arrived in England in April, 1781, preaching at City Road Chapel on his way to Mr. Ireland’s house near Bristol, where, because his friend was ill, he stayed a month, returning to Madeley in May, after having been absent four and a-half years.

He found his parish under a cloud, “but, alas!” he exclaimed, “it is not the luminous cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night Even the few remaining professors stared at me the other day when I preached to them on these words: ‘Ye shall receive the Holy Ghost, for the promise is unto you.’”

So sad was he about the spiritual condition of his parishioners, that he applied to Wesley for one of his helpers, who was then a master in Kingswood School; believing truly that two who were of one mind, both living in communion with the Holy Ghost, had great hope of bringing to life a dead parish, even though one were not an authorised curate, and the other but a sick vicar Fletcher had learned to look *past man*—to God and God alone.

CHAPTER XXI.

A Wonderful Wedding

There existed no “chance” or “ill-fortune” for Fletcher Whatever happened was subject, he believed, to the over-ruling providence and direction of God, and for him there was no second causes, no human marplots He could always sing—

Thrice comfortable hope
That calms my troubled breast;
My Father’s hand prepares the cup,
And what He wills is best.

When in answer to a letter of his to Miss Bosanquet on Christian Perfection there was sent to him a reply which, by the forgetfulness of a friend, lay in a drawer for three years undelivered, he wrote on the morning of its belated arrival:—

“You speak, Madam, of *a letter from Bath*; I do not recollect, at present, your having favoured me with one from that place Is it my lot to be tried or disappointed in this respect? Well, the hairs of our heads, and the letters of our friends, are all numbered; not one of the former falls, not one of the latter miscarries, without the will of Him to whose orders we have long since fully and cheerfully subscribed.”

Miss Bosanquet was at this time in dire difficulties at Cross Hall Perplexed by contrary advice, embarrassed by ever-increasing financial loss, opposed by those who ridiculed her work as a mission to the mean, “a call to the care of cows and horses, sheep and pigs,” and criticised even by those to whom she acted as daily benefactor, her path was by no means an easy one, and eagerly she looked to the Lord for deliverance, although she knew not whence it would come.

She suffered more than she could ever describe through the public work she was called to do “None, O my God, but Thyself, knows what I go through for every public meeting!” she exclaimed in her diary Yet, though this shrinking was combined with exceedingly delicate health, she never shirked her duty, but went steadily on with housekeeping, farming, nursing, or public speaking, just as the Lord gave it to her to do—even consenting to stand upon a horse-block at Huddersfield to address a crowd whom otherwise she could not have reached “Indeed, for none but Thee, my Lord,” she cried after that ordeal, “would I take up this sore cross!.. O do Thine own will upon me in all things!”

On the seventh day of June, a month after Fletcher’s return to Madeley, was the fourteenth anniversary of Miss Bosanquet’s troubled sojourn in Yorkshire “On that day,” she relates, “I took a particular view of my whole situation, and saw difficulties as mountains rise around me Faith was hard put to it. The promises seemed to stand sure, and I thought the season was come; yet the waters were deeper than ever.”

During this time, however, their correspondence had been renewed, and to Fletcher the thought of Mary Bosanquet was bringing more than ordinary comfort and joy.

Finding his health so greatly improved, he thought he might venture upon a still closer friendship, and the very day after Miss Bosanquet’s “mountains” and “deeper waters” seemed to hem her in, a new door opened for her in a proposal of marriage, which assured her of the regard Fletcher had secretly treasured for her for twenty-five long years.

In August Mr. Fletcher travelled to Yorkshire to attend Wesley’s conference at Leeds, and Mary Bosanquet’s diary contains this brief record:—

“We corresponded with openness and freedom till August 1st, when he came to Cross Hall and abode there a month; preaching in different places with much power, and having opened our hearts to each other, both on temporals and spirituals, we believed it to be the order of God we should become one, when He should make our way plain.”

That Fletcher could love, and that ardently, will be seen from a letter written a few weeks later to the woman of his choice:—

“O Polly! generous, faithful Polly! Dost thou indeed permit me to write to thy friends, and to ask the invaluable gift of thy hand? That hand, that is *half* mine shall be wholly mine...Polly! I read thy letter, and wondered at the expression in it—‘*If you think me worth writing for.*’ Ah, my holy, my loving, my lovely, my precious friend, I think thee worth writing for *with my vital blood*; I am only sorry that I had not thee beside me to write with thy *wisdom*...

“‘Difficulties!’ If thou hast any I shall gladly share them with thee, and think myself well repaid with the pleasure of praying and praising *with thee* and *for thee*. Therefore, do not talk of *struggling through alone*. I charge thee, by thy faithfulness, let me be *alone* as little time as thou canst...

“I thank thee for that believing sentence—‘But all shall be right.’ The worst thy friends can do is to keep thy money, which I look upon as dung and dross in comparison of thee Ah, Polly! with the *treasure* of *thy* friendship, and the *unsearchable* riches of Christ, how rich thinkest thou I am? Count—cast up—but thou wilt never make out the amazing sum....

“I embrace thee in spirit, and more than mix my soul with thine.” (From “Wesley’s Designated Successor.”)

Of the oneness established between them John Wesley writes interestingly:
—

“He (Mr. Fletcher) was upon all occasions very uncommonly reserved in speaking of himself, whether in writing or conversation. He hardly ever said anything concerning himself, unless it slipped from him unawares. . . This defect was indeed, in some measure, supplied by the entire intimacy which subsisted between him and Mrs. Fletcher. He did not willingly, much less designedly, conceal anything from her They had no secrets with regard to each other, but had indeed one house, one purse, and one heart Before her, it was his invariable rule to *think aloud*; always to open the window in his

breast.” The story of Mary Bosanquet’s deliverance from her Cross Hall embarrassments is practically a leaf from God’s Providence Book.

At the end of October the aspect of her difficulties had in no sense changed, but it was borne in upon both herself and Mr. Fletcher that they should act as though God were indeed working for them. They agreed to marry in a fortnight, but for the first week all remained as it was. In the beginning of the second week a gentleman arrived to buy Cross Hall for £1,620. Three days later another purchased the farm implements and stock. One by one, each inmate of the house was provided for with the exception of a poor cripple with great infirmities, whose home had been with Miss Bosanquet for sixteen years. The very night before the wedding even she was provided for. Sally Lawrence, the adopted girl, was to be taken with them to Madeley.

One little item still remained to trouble the bride—a little payment for the estate was not to be made immediately, and in order to provide certain sums to settle the various Cross Hall inmates in suitable homes, as well as to pay a few current accounts, £100 was required. The matter was laid in faith before Him to whom belongs all the silver and the gold, and by the next post came a bank-note for £100 as a present from Mary Bosanquet’s youngest brother!

The diary is brief as usual concerning the wedding, but it meant very much to both of them that, without a hindrance remaining, the bride should be able to write:—

“So, on Monday, the 12th of November, 1781, in Batley Church, we covenanted in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, ‘to bear each other’s burdens,’ and to become one for ever.”

Mrs. Crosby gives us a look-in upon that memorable marriage day:—

“On the morning of the day several friends met together. They reached Cross Hall before family prayers. Mr. Fletcher . . . read Rev. xix. 7-9: ‘Let us be glad, and rejoice, and give honour to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb is come,’ *etc*. Mr. Fletcher then spoke from these verses in such a manner as greatly tended to spiritualise the solemnities of the day. He said, ‘We invite you to our wedding, but the Holy Ghost invites you to the

marriage of the Lamb. The bride, the Lamb's wife, represents the whole Church, triumphant and militant united together. You may all be the bride, and Jesus will condescend to be the Bridegroom Make yourselves ready by being filled with the Spirit.' He then engaged in prayer. . . They were married in the face of the congregation; the doors were opened, and everyone came in that would We then returned home, and spent a considerable time in singing and prayer There were nearly twenty of us....

"From dinner, which was a spiritual meal as well as a natural one, until tea-time, our time was chiefly spent in prayer or singing After singing the covenant hymn Mr. Fletcher went to Mrs. Fletcher and said to her, 'Well, my dearest friend, will you unite with me in joining ourselves in a perpetual covenant to the Lord? Will you with me serve Him in His members? Will you help me to bring souls to the Blessed Redeemer? And in every possible way this day lay yourself under the strongest ties you can, to help me to glorify my gracious Lord?' She answered, 'May God help me so to do!'

"In the evening Mr. Valton preached in the hall from 'What shall I render unto the Lord for all His benefits? I will take the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord.' His words did not fall to the ground; many were greatly refreshed After the preaching there was a sweet contest among us; everyone thought, 'I, in particular, owe the greatest debt of praise'; at length we agreed to sing—

"I'll praise my Maker while I've breath,
And when my voice is lost in death
Praise shall employ my nobler powers;
My days of praise shall ne'er be past,
While life, and thought, and being last,
Or immortality endures!"

CHAPTER XXII.

Life at Madeley

When a post-chaise drove up to Cross Hall on January and, the crack of the whip made sweet music in the ears of Mrs. Fletcher, for behind those horses she was to make her bridal journey to Madeley, where they were to take up their work together in the name of the Lord.

Cries the praiseful diary:—

“How shall I find language to express the goodness of the Lord! I know no want but that of more grace I have a husband in everything suited to me He bears with all my faults and failings in a manner that continually reminds me of the text, ‘Love your wives as Christ loved the church.’ His constant endeavour is to make me happy; his strongest desire is for my spiritual growth He is, in every sense of the word, the man my highest reason chooses to obey.”

Fletcher himself had greatly changed his opinion since the indictment of his “Reasons for and against Matrimony.” To a friend he wrote his new sentiments thus:—

“God declared it was not good that man, a social being, should live alone, and therefore He gave him a helpmeet for him For the same reason our Lord sent forth His disciples, two and two. Had I searched the three kingdoms I could not have found one brother willing to share gratis my weal, woe, and labours, and complaisant enough to unite his fortunes to mine; but God has found me a partner, *a sister, a wife*, to use St. Paul’s language, who is not afraid to face with me the colliers and bargemen of my parish, until death part us.

“Buried together in our country village, we shall help one another to trim our lamps, and wait for the coming of the Heavenly Bridegroom.”

Mrs. Fletcher's introduction to her husband's parishioners was sufficiently homely and simple. The Madeley kitchen was full of those who had come from a distance, and who were accustomed to take refreshments there between the two services. He led her forward into their midst, adding to his introduction the words, "I have not married this wife for myself only, but for your sakes also."

Only a few weeks later they were honoured by a visit from John Wesley himself, who, friend of method as he was, felt anxious that they should lay down an exactly regular way of ordering their time, even as Mary Bosanquet had done for her larger household in the past.

Whether they complied with the suggestion or not is unrecorded, but Mrs. Fletcher makes beautiful mention of interruptions to her ordinary routine, caused by unexpected visitors:—

"I have this day been engaged in company, and sweetly met the order of God therein."

Blessed secret of peace!

God had so united this saintly man and woman in love and grace that they had abundant cause to write of each other as we find them doing. Once more to the diary:—

"May 30th, 1782... I have the kindest and tenderest of husbands; of so spiritual a man, and so spiritual a union, I had no adequate conception."

To Charles Wesley Fletcher writes in his turn :-

"I thank you for your hint about exemplifying the love of Christ and His Church. I hope we do... My wife is far better to me than the Church to Christ, so that if the parallel fails, it will be on my side."

Between November, 1782, and January, 1783, peace was made by Great Britain with America, France, and Spain. Fletcher made this the occasion of another poem, written in French, entitled, "An Essay upon the Peace of 1783 Dedicated to the Archbishop of Paris."

Five months after their marriage Mr. and Mrs. Fletcher were invited to visit the Methodists of Dublin The Vicar had been absent so long from his people that he found further absence just then impossible Sixteen months later, however, Dr. Coke came from Dublin and renewed the invitation, which they accepted.

They set forth upon their five-day journey, attended by the faithful Sally Lawrence, Mr. Fletcher preaching unannounced at Shrewsbury and Llangollen by the way They spent seven weeks in Dublin, and from accounts written by others, the preaching of the Vicar and the faithful class-leading and personal dealing of his wife were blessed in a remarkable manner A great revival of pure religion followed; as an evidence of which the membership of the Methodist Society in that city was permanently raised from five hundred to one thousand, and a great hunger to know God and to like Him was awakened in the hearts of the people.

One church, indeed, opened its doors to him, but when it was known that he was preaching also in Methodist meeting-houses he was given to understand how unwelcome he would be in any of the pulpits of his clerical brethren The French Church alone said, "Come!" and many flocked there who could understand no word of what he said When asked why they went when this was the case, they replied, "We went to look at him, for heaven seemed to beam from his countenance."

The grateful Methodists thought it only fair to refund the travelling expenses of the Vicar and his wife, handing him a purse of twenty-five guineas for that purpose At first he refused it, but being greatly pressed, he thanked them very heartily, and gracefully handed it over to the Society fund for the sick poor, which he had heard was in a very needy condition.

Life at Madeley was very full. Fletcher regularly visited the eighteen public-houses of his parish, some of them every Sunday, in addition to his other work, and, as a result of his labours and observations, he wrote a pamphlet entitled "Three National Grievances," in which he dealt largely with drunkenness and smuggling Taxation was the third "grievance," wholly influenced in Fletcher's mind by the other two The pamphlet was sent to every Member of Parliament, being intended to show them the necessity for Social Reform.

In the wonderful way of quietly busy men, Fletcher made time to teach in his Madeley School every day, visiting another as often as occasion permitted, which he had established in Madeley Wood. He also founded Sunday Schools, and quickly gathered into them three hundred children, whom he further dealt with in special children's meetings, which were to him a great delight. He had a unique fashion of teaching; quick to avail himself of every passing incident as illustration; he never failed to keep their attention or to engage their affection—the latter being accomplished without any effort upon his part. Until the Thursday before his death, Fletcher kept up these meetings, and he left behind him an unfinished catechism designed for the use of the little ones he so much loved.

Much of the Vicar's time was occupied in visiting the sick. He would show himself intensely grieved if he were not at once apprised of any illness, and as he preached so much on the far outskirts of his parish—ten, twelve, and sixteen miles distant—the calls were many. Whenever they came he was ready. On the bitterest winter's night he would give his unfailing answer through the window to any messenger, "*I will be with you immediately*"; and through storm or frost he set off at once to give the comfort of his presence and the power of his prayers.

With supreme disregard of personal need, Fletcher was never happier than when he had given away every penny in the house. He religiously avoided debt, paying ready money for all he had, but when due claims were met he loved to pillage the household resources for the benefit of his sick poor. Whether *he* had any dinner mattered little, but delight seized hold upon him when his helpmate was discovered in the preparation of delicacies for his parish invalids.

Mrs. Fletcher would often take some article to his wardrobe and find the drawers almost swept clear of linen. Others, he thought, had needed the garments more than he.

A poor widow called one day to pour out a story of difficulties with which she found herself burdened. Money there was none at the moment, but the Vicar was not to be cheated out of this new chance of helping another. Striding into the kitchen, he laid hands upon the pewter dishes, of whose

polish Sally Lawrence was so proud, and handed them to the widow with the remark that “a wooden trencher served better.”

Day by day, indeed, John Fletcher lost himself in the needs and spirit of his Master, finding in his increasingly clear view of God, his ever more intimate fellowship with Christ, abiding treasure and keen delight which were beyond even his power of felicitous expression It was in keeping with his hourly experience that he exclaimed in a letter to Lady Mary Fitzgerald :

“Who are we, my lady, that we should not be swallowed up by the holy, loving, living Spirit, who fills Heaven and earth? Whether we consider it or not, there He is, a true, holy, loving, merciful God Assent to it, my lady, believe it, rejoice in it Let Him be God, *all in all*; your God in Christ Jesus What an ocean of love to swim in— to dive into!”

CHAPTER XXIII.

“God Is Love!”

In spite of its beautiful situation, Madeley was wont at times to be swept by a malignant fever, which carried away many of its victims to the grave. Shortly before the visit of Mr. and Mrs. Fletcher to Dublin, such a visitation had occurred, the faithful Sally being attacked by it, and nursed to convalescence by mistress and friend.

Two years later it became Sally's turn to play the part of nurse, for Mrs. Fletcher, who had visited two parishioners who were dying of the pestilence, was herself stricken.

It was a terrible time of testing for her devoted husband. In anguish of mind, but with true surrender of his will to God, he yielded his treasure upon an altar of sacrifice akin to that of Abraham's building; but in answer to his devotion and prayer he received her again as alive from the dead.

With a peculiarly solemn joy he welcomed his wife back to his side to share the work they so truly loved, but anxious lest he should place too much reliance upon the precious things God had given him here, he would call to her several times in a day to drop every duty for a few moments that together they might enjoy communion with God. Says Mrs. Fletcher:—

“We spent much time in prayer for the fulness of the Spirit, and were led to an act of *abandonment* (as we called it) of our whole selves into the hands of God, to do or to suffer whatever was pleasing to Him.”

* * * * *

Only a fortnight after his wife's recovery Fletcher was out visiting his people from three in the afternoon until nine at night, and, August though it was, he returned with a chill.

The following Sunday he almost fainted while reading prayers in the church His wife pressed up to the desk with a friend or two, and begged him to leave the service to another He gently refused; windows were opened, some flowers brought to refresh him with their sweet scent, and he was able to mount the steps of the pulpit, where he preached with power from “*How excellent is Thy lovingkindness, O God! therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of Thy wings.*”

The communion service which succeeded was a very lengthy one, but he administered to those who came until nearly two o’clock, breaking the silence with many verses of hymns and exhortations.

When the long service was over, Mrs. Fletcher led him straight to bed, but the exertion had been too much; he fainted, and the two following days lay upon a couch and slept much.

Mrs. Fletcher, very simply but touchingly, tells the story of those few last days:—

“On Wednesday, August 10th, he told me he had received such a manifestation of the full meaning of the words, ‘*God is love,*’ that he could not express it ‘It *fills me,*’ he said, ‘it *fills me every moment* O Polly! my dear Polly! *God is love!* Shout! Shout aloud! Oh! it so fills me that I want a gust of praise to go to the ends of the earth But it seems as if I could not speak much longer Let us fix upon a sign between ourselves’ (tapping me twice with his finger) ‘By this I mean that *God is love, and we will draw each other into God Observe! by this we will draw each other into God.*’ Sally coming in, he cried, ‘O Sally! *God is love!* Shout, both of you! I want to hear you shout His praise!’ All this time his medical attendant hoped he was in no danger He knew his disease to be the fever; but as he had no bad headache, slept much without the least delirium, and had an almost regular pulse, the symptoms were thought to be favourable.

“On Thursday, August 11th, his speech began to fail, but to his friendly doctor he would not be silent while he had any power to speak, often saying, ‘O Sir, you take much thought for my body; give me leave to take thought for your soul.’ When I could scarcely understand anything he said, I

spoke the words, '*God is love!*' Instantly he caught them, and broke out in a rapture, '*God is love, love, love! O for the gust of praise I want to sound.*' Here his voice again failed If I named his sufferings he would smile, and make the sign.

“On Friday, August 12th, finding his body covered with spots, I so far understood them as to feel a sword pierce through my soul As I knelt by his bed, with my hand in his, entreating the Lord to be with us in this tremendous hour, he strove to say many things, but could not At length, pressing my hand, and often repeating the sign, he breathed out '*Head of the Church, be head to my wife!*'”

Mrs. Fletcher then repeated two lines in which he had always found great comfort:—

Jesu's blood, through earth and skies,
Mercy, free, boundless mercy, cries.

With much difficulty he responded :—

Mercy's full power I soon shall prove,
Loved with an everlasting love.

“If Jesus is very present with thee lift thy right hand,” said his wife, as she bent over him He raised it Waiting a moment or two she said, “If the prospect of glory opens before thee, repeat the sign.” Twice he lifted that feeble right hand in testimony, then fell into *coma*, lying with his eyes open and fixed.

While this was taking place in the Vicarage the church close by was the scene of many tears Fletcher's people gathered there from time to time to pour out their supplications to God that He would spare their beloved pastor; but none could find it in his heart to lead a service, or raise a hymn.

In the cottages whole families sat waiting for news, while messengers, who went to and from the Vicarage, were waylaid on every side for tidings of joy or sorrow.

Numbers of poor villagers were wont to come from a distance every Sunday, being entertained in their Vicar's kitchen between the services. These lingered about the house in distress, unable to persuade themselves to seek their distant homes while one so dear to them lay probably dying.

"If we could only *look* at him once more!" they whispered pleadingly.

Accordingly the door of the sick room was flung wide, the curtains drawn back from the bed, and this infinitely pathetic procession of peasants crept softly past the open door, each one pausing for a long look of love upon him whom they revered as spiritual father and saint.

For the first time in their experience there was no kindling light in his eye, no gleam of welcome from the lips which had so often parted in smiles and blessing His spirit hovered on the borders of a land beyond their reach.

That Sabbath Day had scarcely spent itself when from earthly sleep Jean Guillaume De La Fléchère entered into eternal waking, so one in spirit with his Lord that the change could have been no more surprising than to Enoch of old.

To the woman who knelt at his bedside until that last dread moment, the parting was no ordinary sorrow.

"I am truly a desolate woman, who hath no helper but Thee!" she wailed.

"Three years nine months and two days I have possessed my *heavenly-minded husband*; but now the sun of my earthly joy is *set for ever!* and my soul is filled with an anguish which only finds its consolation in a total abandonment and resignation to the will of God.

"That awful night, when I had hung over my dear husband for many hours, expecting every breath to be his last, and during which time he could not speak to, nor take any notice of me, a flood of unspeakable sorrow overspread my heart, and quite overwhelmed my spirit... My fatigue had been great; I was barely recovered from my fever, and this stroke so tore my nerves that it was an inlet to much temptation In former parts of my life I

have felt deep sorrow, but such were now my feelings that no words I am able to think of can convey an adequate idea thereof.

“The next morning, O my God! what a cup didst Thou put into my hand! Not only my beloved husband, but, it appeared to me, my Saviour also was torn from me! Clouds and darkness surrounded both soul and body The sins even of my infancy came before me, and assaulted me as thick as hail! I seemed to have no love, no faith, no light—and yet I could not doubt but I should see the smiling face of God in glory!...An unshaken belief that Christ would bring me through all, was my great support; and it seemed to me that I must have been annihilated had I been moved from that anchor... All my religion seemed shrunk into one point, viz., a constant cry, *'Thy will be done! I will, yes; I will glorify Thee! even in this fire.'*”

It was at first a matter of some distress to Mrs. Fletcher that she must leave the home where they had been so happy together Every other place alike looked desolate To her relief it was arranged that she should rent the Vicarage as long as she wished to do so, working as she chose among the people of the parish The son of the patron of the living became the new Vicar, and as he did not intend to reside at Madeley Mrs. Fletcher was allowed to recommend the Curate.

Thus, by God's grace, was the labour of the saintly Vicar carried on and confirmed. The sweetness of his spirit lingered in fragrant influence upon the hearts of those whom he had blessed in life, and though eulogies abound of his remarkable talent, his gentle courtesy, his unfailing kindness, his beauty of holiness, none who spoke of him could ever forget that for himself he had only claimed the position which almost every morning and evening of his later life he had thus defined:—

I nothing have, I nothing am;
My treasure's in the bleeding Lamb,
Both now and evermore.

In the desolate stillness of Madeley Vicarage, where she lived for thirty years after bidding him farewell, Mrs. Mary Fletcher performed the last bit of earthly service she might do in the name of her beloved; she wrote the

inscription, which appears on the following page, for his tombstone in the old churchyard they had so often crossed side by side.

*Here lies the body of
the Rev John William De La Fléchère,
vicar of Madeley,
who was born at Nyon, in Switzerland,
September the 12th, 1729,
and finished his course august the 14th, 1785,
in this village,
where his UNEXAMPLED labours
will long be REMEMBERED.*

*He EXERCISED his ministry for the SPACE of
twenty-five years
in this parish
with uncommon zeal and ability.*

*Many believed his report, and became
his joy and crown of rejoicing;
while others constrained him to take up
the LAMENTATION of the PROPHET:*

*“All the day long have I stretched out my hands
unto A DISOBEDIENT and GAINSAYING people;
yet surely my judgment is with the lord,
and my work with my God.”*

“He being dead, yet SPEAKETH.”

CHAPTER XXIV.

Extracts from Fletcher's Letters

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Christ-Exalting Joy

To Sarah Ryan, Wesley's housekeeper at Bristol, and to her friend,
DOROTHY FURLEY:

"October 1st, 1759.

"DEAR *sisters*,—I have been putting off writing to you lest the action of writing should divert my soul from the awful and delightful worship it is engaged in But I now conclude I shall be no loser if I invite you to love Him my soul loveth; to dread Him my soul dreadeth; to adore Him my soul adoreth.

"Sink with me before the throne of Grace; and, while the cherubim veil their faces, and cry out in tender fear and exquisite trembling, 'Holy! Holy! Holy!' let us put our mouths in the dust, and echo back the solemn sound, 'Holy! Holy! Holy!' Let us plunge ourselves in that ocean of purity. Let us try to fathom the depths of Divine mercy; and, convinced of the impossibility of such an attempt, let us lose ourselves in them Let us be comprehended by God, if we cannot comprehend Him Let us be supremely happy in God Let the intenseness of our happiness border upon misery, because we can make Him no return Let our head become waters, and our eyes a fountain of tears— *tears* of humble repentance, of solemn joy, of silent admiration, of exalted adoration, of raptured desires, of inflamed transports, of speechless awe My God and my all! Your God and your all! Our God and our all! Praise Him! With our souls blended into one by Divine love, let us with one mouth glorify the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; our Father, who is over all, through all, and in us all "I charge you before the Lord Jesus, who giveth life and more abundant life; I entreat you

by all the actings of faith, the stretchings of hope, the flames of love you have ever felt, sink to greater depths of self-abasing repentance; rise to greater heights of Christ-exalting joy And let Him, who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that you can ask or think, carry on, and fulfil in you the work of faith with power; with that power whereby He subdueth all tilings unto Himself Be steadfast in hope, immovable in patience and love, always abounding in the outward and inward labour of love; and receive the end of your faith, the salvation of your souls “I am, dear sisters, your well-wisher,

“John Fletcher.”

* * * * *

“Only a Methodist!”

To *Charles Wesley*:

“Madeley, October 12th, 1761.

“My dear sir,—You have always the goodness to encourage me, and your encouragements are not unseasonable; for discouragements follow one another with very little intermission. Those which are of an inward nature are sufficiently known to you; but some others are peculiar to myself, especially those I have had for eight days past, during Madeley wake.

“Seeing that I could not suppress these bacchanals, I did all in my power to moderate their madness; but my endeavours have had little or no effect You cannot well imagine how much the animosity of my parishioners is heightened, and with what boldness it discovers itself against me, because I preached against drunkenness, shows, and bull-baiting. The publicans and maltmen will not forgive me. They think that to preach against drunkenness, and to cut their purse, is the same thing.

“My church begins not to be so well filled as it has been, and I account for it thus: the curiosity of some of my hearers is satisfied, and others are offended by the word; the roads are worse; and if it shall ever please the Lord to pour His Spirit upon us, the time is not yet come. The people,

instead of saying, 'Let us go up to the house of the Lord,' exclaim, 'Why should we go and hear a Methodist?'

"I should lose all patience with my flock if I had not more reason to be satisfied with them than with myself My own barrenness furnishes me with excuses for theirs; and I wait the time when God shall give seed to the sower and increase to the seed sown In waiting that time, I learn the meaning of this prayer, 'Thy will be done.'

"Believe me, your sincere, though unworthy friend,

"*J Fletcher.*"

* * * * *

The Believer's Song

To *Miss Hatton*:

"*Madeley, January 9th, 1767.*

"*My dear friend,—The dream of life will soon be over; the morning of eternity will soon succeed Away then with all the shadows of time! Away from them to the Eternal Substance—to Jesus, the First and the Last, by whom, and for whom, all things consist If you take Jesus to be your head, by the mystery of faith, you will be united to the resurrection and the life The bitterness of death is past, my dear friend. Only look to Jesus He died for you—died in your place—died under the frowns of Heaven, that we might die under its smiles Regard neither unbelief nor doubt Fear neither sin nor hell Choose neither life nor death All these are swallowed up in the immensity of Christ, and are triumphed over in His Cross Fight the good fight of faith Hold fast your confidence in the atoning, sanctifying blood of the Lamb of God. Confer no more with flesh and blood Go, meet the Bridegroom Behold He cometh! Trim your lamp Quit yourself like a soldier of Jesus. I entreat you, as a companion in tribulation; I charge you, as a minister, go, at every breath you draw, to Him, who says, 'Him that cometh unto Me, I will in no wise cast out'; and 'He that believeth in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.'* Joyfully sing the believer's song, 'O Death,

where is thy sting? O Grave, where is thy victory? Thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory, through our Lord Jesus Christ!’ Let your surviving friends triumph over you, as one faithful unto death as one triumphing in death itself.”

* * * * *

Christ the Truth

To Mr. Charles Perronet, who was suffering great affliction of body and mind:

“1772, September 7th.—*My very dear friend*,—No cross, no crown; the heavier the cross, the brighter the crown.

“Oh, for a firm and lasting faith,
To credit all the Almighty saith!

“Faith—I mean the *evidence of things not seen*—is a powerful cordial to support and exhilarate us under the heaviest pressures of pain and temptation. By faith, we live upon the *invisible, eternal* God; we believe that *in Him* we live, move, and have our being; insensibly we slide from *self* into *God*, from the visible into the invisible, from the carnal into the spiritual, from time into eternity Here our spirits are ever young; they live in and upon the very fountain of strength, sprightliness, and joy Oh! my dear friend, let us rest more upon the *truth as it is in Jesus* Of late, I have been brought to feed more upon Jesus as *the truth* I see more in Him in that character than I ever did I see Christ *the truth* of my life, friends, relations, sense, food, raiment, light, fire, resting-place All out of Him are but shadows All *in Him* are blessed sacraments; I mean visible signs of the fountain, or vehicles to convey the streams of inward grace.”

* * * * *

Uninterrupted Peace

To Charles Wesley:

“Madeley, May 11th, 1776.

“My dear brother,—What are you doing in London? Are you ripening as fast for the grave as I am? How should we lay out every moment for God? For some days I have had the symptoms of an inward consumptive decay—spitting of blood, etc Thank God! I look at our last enemy with great calmness.

*“I still look for an outpouring of the Spirit, inwardly and outwardly Should I die before that great day I shall have the consolation to see it from afar Thank God! I enjoy uninterrupted peace in the midst of my trials, which are, sometimes, not a few Joy also I possess; but I look for joy of a superior nature I feel myself, in a good degree, dead to praise and dispraise. I hope, at least, that it is so, because I do not feel that the one lifts me up, or that the other dejects me I want to see a Pentecost Christian Church; and, if it is not to be seen at this time upon earth, I am willing to go and see that glorious wonder in Heaven How is it with you? Are you ready to seize the crown in the name of the Redeemer *reigning* in your heart? We run a race towards the grave. John is likely to outrun you, unless you have a swift foot.*

*“Let us pray that God would renew our youth, as that of the eagle, that we may bear fruit in our old age I hope I shall see you *before* my death; if not, let us rejoice at the thought of meeting in Heaven.”*

* * * * *

A Witness in Word and Deed

To certain Methodists at Hull and York who invited him to visit the great Methodist county:

“London, November 12th, 1776.

“My dear brethren,—I thank you for your kind letters and invitations to visit you, and the brethren about you I have often found an attraction in Yorkshire My desire was indeed a little selfish; I wanted to improve by the conversation of my unknown brethren If God bids me be strong again, I shall be glad to try if He will be pleased to comfort us by the mutual faith

both of you and me My desire is that Christ may be glorified both in my life and death If I have any desire to live at any time, it is principally to be a witness, in word and deed, of the dispensation of *power from on high*; and to point out that kingdom which does not consist in word, but in *power*, even in *righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost, the Spirit of power* I am writing an essay upon that important part of the Christian doctrine.

“Should I be spared to visit you, the keep of a horse, and the poor rider, will be all the burden I should lay on you; and that will be more than my Heavenly Master indulged Himself in. I am just setting out for Norwich with Mr. Wesley, whose renewed strength and immense labours astonish me What a pattern for preachers! His redeeming the time is, if I mistake not, matchless.

“Should I never have the pleasure of thanking you in person for your brotherly regard, I beg you will endeavour to meet me in the Kingdom of our Father, where distance of time and place is lost in the fulness of Him who is *all in all*. The way ye know—the penitential way of a heart-felt faith working by obedient love.”

* * * * *

In the Balances

To Mr. Ireland:

“NEWINGTON, *January 29th*, 1777.

“Thanks be to God, and to my dear friend, for favours upon favours, for undeserved love and the most endearing tokens of it!

“I have received your obliging letters, full of kind offers; and your jar, full of excellent grapes May God open to you the book of life, and seal upon your heart all the offers and promises it contains! May the treasures of Christ’s love, and all the fruits of the Spirit, be open to my dear friend, and unwearied benefactor!

“Last Sunday, Providence sent me Dr. Turner, who, under God, saved my life, twenty-three years ago, in a dangerous illness; and I am inclined to try what *his* method will do He orders me asses’ milk, chicken, *etc.*; forbids me riding, and recommends the greatest quietness. He prohibits the use of Bristol water; advises some water of a purgative nature; and tries to promote expectoration by a method that so far answers, though I spit by it more blood than before.

“With respect to my soul, I find it good to be in the balance—awfully weighed every day for life or death I thank God the latter has lost its sting, and endears to me the Prince of Life But oh, I want Christ, my resurrection, to be a thousand times more dear to me; and I doubt not He will be so, when I am *filled* with the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him Let us wait for that glory, praising God for all we have received, and trusting Him for all we have not yet received Let our faith do justice to His veracity; our hope to His goodness; and our love to all His perfections It is good to trust in the Lord; and His saints like well to hope in Him.”

* * * * *

Make Haste to Christ

To Mr. William Wase:

“Bristol, November, 1777.

“*My dear brother,*—Go to Mrs. Cound, and tell her I charge her, in the name of God, to give up the world, to set out with all speed for Heaven, and to join the few about her who fear God If she refuses, call again; call weekly, if not daily, and warn her from me till she is ripe for glory Tell the brethren at Broseley that I did my body an injury the last time I preached to them on the Green; but, if they took the warning, I do not repine Give my love to George Crannage; tell him to make haste to Christ, and not to doze away his last days.

“The physician has not yet given me up; but, I bless God, I do not wait for his farewell, to give myself up to my God and Saviour I write by stealth, as my friends here would have me forbear writing, and even talking; but I will

never part with my privilege of writing and shouting, ‘*Thanks be to God who giveth us the victory*’ over sin, death, and the grave ‘*through Jesus Christ.*’ To Him be glory for ever and ever! Amen!”

* * * * *

Dig Hard for Hidden Treasure

To the Methodists in and about Madeley:

“*My dear companions in tribulation*,—Peace and mercy, faith, hope, and love be multiplied to you all from the Father of mercies through the Lord Jesus Christ, by the spirit of grace! I thank you for your kind remembrance of me in your prayers I am yet spared to pray for you Oh, that I had more power with God! I would bring down Heaven into all your hearts Strive together in love for the living faith, the glorious hope, the sanctifying love once delivered to the saints Look to Jesus. Move on; run yourselves in the heavenly race, and let each sweetly draw his brother along, till the whole company appears before the redeeming God in Sion.

“I hope God will, in His mercy, spare me to see you in the flesh; and if I cannot labour for you, I shall gladly suffer with you. If you will put health into my flesh, joy into my heart, and life into my whole frame, be of *one heart* and of *one soul* Count nothing your *own* but your *sin* and *shame*; and bury that dreadful property in the grave of our Saviour Let all you are and have be His who bought you Dig hard in the *Gospel* mines for hidden treasure Blow hard the furnace of prayer with the bellows of faith until you are melted into love, and the dross of sin is purged out of every heart Get together into Jesus, the heavenly ark, and sweetly sail into the ocean of eternity; so shall you be true miners, furnacemen, and bargemen. Farewell, in Jesus! Tell Mrs. Counds I shall greatly rejoice if she remembers Lot’s wife.”

* * * * *

The Dreghs of Life

To Mr Ireland:

“*Madeley, September 13th, 1784.*

“*My dear friend,—I keep in my sentry-box till Providence removes me. My situation is quite suited to my little strength. I may do as much or as little as I please, according to my weakness; and I have an advantage, which I can have nowhere else in such a degree—my little field of action is just at my own door, so that if I happen to overdo myself, I have but to step from my pulpit to my bed, and from my bed to my grave. If I had a body full of vigour, and a purse full of money, I should like well enough to travel about as Mr. Wesley does; but as Providence does not call me to it I readily submit. The snail does best in its shell; were it to aim at galloping, like the racehorse, it would be ridiculous indeed. My wife is quite of my mind with respect to the call we have to a sedentary life. We are two poor invalids, who between us make half a labourer.*

“*We shall have tea cheap and light very dear; I don’t admire the change. Twenty thousand chambers walled up, and filled with foul air, are converted into so many dungeons for the industrious artisan, who, being compelled by this murderous tax, denies himself the benefit of light and air. Blessed be God! the light of Heaven and the air of the spiritual world are still free.*

“*My dear partner sweetly helps me to drink the dregs of life, and to carry with ease the daily cross. We are not long for this world—we see it, we feel it; and, by looking at death and his conqueror, we fight beforehand our last battle with that last enemy whom our dear Lord has overcome for us. That we may triumph over him with an humble, Christian courage, is the prayer of my dear friend, yours,*

“*John Fletcher.*”

CHAPTER XXV.

Extracts from Fletcher's Writings

The Sine of Unbelief

“Unbelief is a sin of so deep a dye that the devils in hell cannot commit the like. Our Saviour never prayed, wept, bled, and died for devils He never said to them, 'Ye will not come unto Me, that ye might have life.' They can never be so madly ungrateful as to slight a Saviour Mercy never wooed their stubborn, proud hearts as it does ours They have abused grace, it is true, but they never trampled mercy underfoot. This more than diabolical sin is reserved for thee, careless sinner Now thou hearest Christ compassionately say in the text, 'Ye will not come unto Me,' and thou remainest unmoved; but the time cometh when Jesus, who meekly entreats, shall sternly curse; when He who in tender patience says, 'Ye will not come unto Me,' shall thunder in righteous vengeance, 'Depart from Me, ye cursed; depart unto the second death—the fire prepared for the devil and his angels.' In vain wilt thou plead then as thou dost now, 'Lord, I am no adulterer; I am no extortioner; I used to eat at Thy table; I was baptised in Thy name; I was a true churchman; there are many worse than I am.' This will not admit thee into the Kingdom of Christ His answer will be, 'I know you not; you never came to Me for life.'”

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Reading not Preaching.

“Reading approved sermons is generally supposed to be preaching the Gospel. If this were really so, we need but look out some school-boy of tolerable capacity; and, after instructing him to read, with proper emphasis and gesture, the sermons of Tillotson, Sherlock, or Saurin, we shall have made him an excellent minister of the Word of God. But, if preaching the Gospel is to publish among sinners that repentance and salvation, which we have experienced in ourselves, it is evident that experience and sympathy

are more necessary to the due performance of this work than all the accuracy and elocution that can possibly be acquired.

“When this sacred experience and this generous sympathy began to lose their prevalence in the Church, their place was gradually supplied by the trifling substitutes of study and affectation. Carnal prudence has now for many ages solicitously endeavoured to adapt itself to the taste of the wise and the learned But, while *’the offence of the cross’* is avoided, neither the wise nor the ignorant are effectually converted.

“In consequence of the same error, the ornaments of theatrical eloquence have been sought after, with a shameful solicitude. And what has been the fruit of so much useless toil? *Preachers*, after all, have played their part with much less applause than *comedians*; and their curious auditories are still running from the pulpit to the stage, for the purpose of hearing fables repeated with a degree of sensibility, which the messengers of truth can neither *feel*, nor *feign*.”

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Pride in Apparel

“I cannot pass in silence the detestable, though fashionable, sin, which has brought down the curse of Heaven, and poured desolation and ruin upon the most flourishing kingdoms—I mean pride in apparel Even in this place, where poverty, hard labour, and drudgery would, one should think, prevent a sin which Christianity cannot tolerate even in kings’ houses, there are not wanting foolish virgins, who draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and betray the levity of their hearts by that of their dress Yea, some women, who should be mothers in Israel, and adorn themselves with good works as holy and godly matrons, openly affect the opposite character You may see them offer themselves first to the idol of vanity, and then sacrifice their children upon the same altar As some sons of Belial teach their little ones, to curse, before they can well speak, so these daughters of Jezebel drag their unhappy offspring, before they can walk, to the haunts of vanity and pride They complain of evening lectures, but run to midnight dancings Oh, that such persons would let the prophet’s words sink into their frothy minds, and fasten upon their careless hearts: *’Because the daughters of Sion are*

haughty, and walk with stretched-forth necks and wanton eyes, the Lord will smite with a sore the crown of their head, and discover their shame: instead of well-set hair, there shall be baldness, and burning instead of beauty.’”

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What Is Saving Faith?

“What is *saving* faith? I dare not say that it is ‘believing heartily’ my sins are forgiven me for Christ’s sake; for, if I live in sin, that belief is a *destructive* conceit, and not *saving* faith. Neither dare I say, that ‘saving faith is *only* a sure trust and confidence that Christ loved me, and gave Himself for me;’ for, if I did, I should almost damn all mankind for four thousand years. Such definitions of saving faith are, I fear, too *narrow* to be just, and too *unguarded* to keep out Solifidianism. To avoid such mistakes; to contradict no Scriptures; to put no black mark of *damnation* upon any man, that in any nation fears God and works righteousness; to leave no room for Solifidianism, and to present the reader with a definition of faith adequate to *the everlasting Gospel*, I would choose to say, that justifying or saving faith is *believing* the saving truth *with the heart unto* internal, and (as we have opportunity) *unto* external *righteousness*, according to our light and dispensation. To St. Paul’s words (Rom. x. 10), I add the epithets *internal* and *external*, in order to exclude, according to I John iii. 7, 8, the filthy imputation, under which fallen believers may, if we credit the Antinomians, commit internal and external adultery, mental and bodily murder, without the least reasonable fear of endangering their faith, their interest in God’s favour, and their inadmissible title to a throne of glory.”

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The Eye of Faith

“*Believing* is the gift of *the God of Grace*, as *breathing, moving, and eating* are the gifts of *the God of Nature*. He gives me lungs and air, that I may breathe; He gives me life and muscles, that I may move; He bestows upon me food and a mouth, that I may eat; but He neither *breathes, moves, nor*

eats for me Nay, when I think proper, I can accelerate my breathing, motion, and eating: and, if I please, I may *fast, lie down, or hang myself*, and, by that means, put an end to my *eating, moving, and breathing*. Faith is the gift of God to believers, *as sight* is to you The parent of good freely gives you the light of the sun, and organs proper to receive it. Everything around you bids you use your eyes and see; nevertheless, you may not only drop your curtains, but close your eyes also This is exactly the case with regard to faith Free grace removes, in part, the total blindness which Adam's fall brought upon us; free grace gently sends us some beams of truth, which is the light of *the sun of righteousness*; it disposes the eye of our understanding to see those beams; it excites us, in various ways, to welcome them; it blesses us with many, perhaps with all the means of faith, such as opportunities to hear, read, enquire, and power to consider, assent, consent, resolve, and re-resolve to believe the truth But, after all, *believing* is as much our own act as *seeing*. We may in general do, suspend, or omit the *act* of faith Nay, we may do by the eye of our faith, what some report Democritus did by his bodily eyes. Being tired of seeing the follies of mankind, to rid himself of that disagreeable sight, he put his eyes out We may be so averse from *the light, which enlightens every man that comes into the world*; we may so dread it because our works are evil, as to exemplify, like the Pharisees, such awful declarations as these: *Their eyes have they closed, lest they should see: wherefore God gave them up to a reprobate mind, and, they were blinded.*"

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From Animal Man to Spiritual Man

"What is the state of a soul that is born again; and in what does regeneration consist? In general, we may say, it is that great change by which man passes from a state of nature to a state of grace He was an animal man; in being born again he becomes a spiritual man His natural birth had made him like to fallen Adam—to the old man, against whom God had pronounced the sentence of death, seeing it is the wages of sin; but his spiritual birth makes him like to Jesus Christ—to the new man—which is created according to God in righteousness and true holiness He was before born a child of wrath — proud, sensual, and unbelieving, full of the love of the world and of self-

love, a lover of money and of earthly glory and pleasure, rather than a lover of God; but, by regeneration, he is become a child and an heir of God, and a joint heir with Christ The humility, the purity, the love of Jesus, is shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Spirit which is given to him, making him bear the image of the *Second Adam*. He is in Christ a new creature; old things are passed away, all things are become new All the powers and faculties of his soul are renovated His understanding, heretofore covered with darkness, is illuminated by the experimental knowledge which he has of God and of His Son Jesus Christ His conscience, asleep and insensible, awakes and speaks with a fidelity irreproachable His hard heart is softened and broken His will, stubborn and perverse, yields, and becomes conformable to the will of God His passions, unruly, and earthly, and sensual, submit to the conduct of grace, and turn of themselves to objects invisible and heavenly And the members of his body, servants more or less to iniquity, are now employed in the service of righteousness unto holiness.”

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Tastes that Correspond

“To rejoice in the pleasures that are at God’s right hand, it is needful to have senses and a taste that correspond thereto. The swine trample pearls under their feet The elevated discourse of a philosopher is insupportable to a stupid mechanic; and an ignorant peasant, introduced into a circle of men of learning and taste, is disgusted, sighs after his village, and declares no hour ever appeared to him so long It would be the same to a man who is not regenerated, if we could suppose that God would so far forget His truth as to open to him the gate of Heaven He would be incapable of those transports of love which make the happiness of the glorified saints It would be insupportable for him now to meditate one hour on the perfections of God; what then shall He do among the *cherubim* and *seraphim*, and the *spirits of just men made perfect*, who draw from thence their ravishing delights? He loves the pleasures and comforts of an animal life; but are these the same with the exercises of the spiritual life? His conversations, his readings, his amusements, as void of edification as of usefulness, rarely fatigue him; but an hour of meditation or prayer is insufferable If he be not

born again, not only he cannot be in a state to rejoice in the pleasures of Paradise, any more than a deaf man to receive with transport the most exquisite music; but the ravishing delights of angels would cause in him an insupportable distaste. Yes, he would banish himself from the presence of God rather than pass an eternity in prostrating himself before the throne, and crying day and night, *Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts, who is, and who was, and who is to come!* We conclude that the gate of Heaven must be opened upon earth by regeneration, and by the love of God, or that it will remain shut for ever; and that a local paradise would be only a sorrowful prison to a man not regenerated, because, carrying nothing thither but depraved and earthly appetites and passions, and finding nothing there but spiritual and celestial objects, disgust and dissatisfaction would be the consequence; and, like Satan, his own mind would be his hell.”

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Wise Words to the Sinner

“I conjure you by the majesty of that God before whom angels rejoice with trembling; by the terror of the Lord, who may speak to you in thunder, and this instant require your soul of you; by the tender mercies, the bowels of compassion of your Heavenly Father, which are moved in your favour, all ungrateful as you are! I conjure you by the incarnation of the Eternal Word, by whom you were created; by the humiliation, the pains, the temptations, the tears, the bloody sweat, the agony, the cries of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ! I conjure you by the bonds, the insults, the scourgings, the robes of derision, the crown of thorns, the ponderous cross the nails, the instruments of death which pierced His torn body; by the arrows of the Almighty, the poison of which drank up His spirit; by that mysterious stroke of Divine wrath, and by those unknown terrors which forced Him to exclaim, ‘My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me!’ I conjure you by the interests of your immortal soul, and by the unseen accidents which may precipitate you into eternity; by the bed of death, upon which you will soon be stretched, and by the useless sighs which you will then pour out, if your peace be not made with God! I conjure you by the sword of Divine justice, and by the sceptre of grace; by the sound of the last trumpet, and by the sudden appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ, with ten

thousand of His holy angels; by that august tribunal, at which you will appear with me, and which shall decide our lot for ever; by the vain despair of hardened sinners, and by the unknown transports of regenerate souls! I conjure you from this instant work out your salvation with fear and trembling! Enter by the door into the sheepfold Sell all to purchase the pearl of great price Count all things dung and dross in comparison of the excellency of the knowledge of Jesus Christ Let Him not go till He blesses you with that faith which justifies, and that sanctification without which no man shall see the Lord And, soon transported from this vale of tears into the mansions of the just made perfect, you shall cast your crown of immortal glory at the feet of Him that sitteth upon the throne, and before the Lamb who has redeemed us by His blood: to whom be the blessing, and the honour, and the glory, and the power for ever and ever! Amen.”